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SIX FOOT SI.

OR,

THE MAN TO "TIE TO."

A Tale of the Hero of Mulligan's Bend.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "THREE OF A KIND," "ALWAYS ON
HAND," "THE GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE,"
"TIGER DICK," "A HARD CROWD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN A HORNETS' NEST.

OUT from the mining-camp of Mulligan's Bend rode one of those men whose acts of heroism make a faithful record of life in the American El Dorado read like mediæval romance.

Standing six feet in his stockings, and built in proportion, with wavy blonde hair falling to his shoulders, and a beard of the same covering his massive chest, this natural leader of men was known as Six-foot Si.

Just now his face wore a troubled expression, and as he urged his horse forward he muttered uneasily to himself:

"It's bad enough fur a man, the which we're used to that; but fur a woman, an sich a woman!—no! no! that thar's clean ag'in' natur'.

IN ITS SPECTRAL LIGHT THE GHASTLY FACE OF HIS DEAD PARD STOOD OUT AS HE HAD SEEN IT MANY A TIME IN THE OLD DAYS WHEN HE WAS PORING OVER THE BAFFLING CRYPTOGRAM.

Why, she's built fur smoothin' a galoot's piller when he's salted bad, an' his blood's a-b'ilin' with fever, an' the coyotes is howlin' fur his bones; but the Lord never 'lowed as her kind was fur slingin' no cold meat with her own hand. Revenge be blowed!"

He spoke with bitter indignation, as if some evil spirit were tempting the woman to such unwomanly work, and he longed to throttle it and free her from its malign influence.

"But she won't be stood off," he pursued, "an' the Lord knows she's had a pill as it's hard fur human natur' to swaller. I don't blame her none. I reckon I'd do the same ef I was in her shoes. But you bet yer bottom dollar Six-foot Si ain't a-standin' by with his han's in his breeches pockets, a-seein' of her put through no such dirty job!"

"The ornery crittur'd orter go up the flume anyway; an' ef it comes to the pinch—her or me—I reckon it won't set heavy on my stomach ef I give him the grand bounce, an' save her the trouble an' the recollection."

As he reached this conclusion, his blue eyes took on a look of implacable determination.

Woe to the enemy on whom he resolved to wreak vengeance.

The act was one of righteous requital, so he believed. A woman—the nature of his sentiment for whom he had not yet acknowledged even to himself, but in whose behalf he would have truly said he was willing to die—was to be saved from an act of violence unbecoming her womanhood. He asked no more.

The country was in a fever of excitement. In everybody's mouth he heard exaggerated accounts of the tragic events of the past few days.

The facts were briefly these: For four years a miner named Bob Cady had been puzzling over the directions, written in cipher, of a map purporting to locate a valuable mine, the history of which had for years made one of the marvelous stories that are told over and over again in mining-camps, losing nothing by repetition.

When, on the verge of insanity with long suspense and alternating hope and despond, he had at last actually discovered the key, and made the cryptogram intelligible, he had quarreled with his partner over the division of the proceeds.

Goaded by avarice, Joe Moran had killed Bob Cady, and the struggle for the precious cryptogram had embroiled the two mining-camps of Coyote and Mulligan's Bend.

In this contest the prize had fallen into the possession of a league of three famous men—Tiger Dick, Iron Despard, and the Sportive Sport—but through the interplay of their stormy passions, Joe Moran had at last secured it, with the assistance of a band of mountain outlaws, to whom he had held out the prospect of a share in the mine.

At Mulligan's Bend the betrothed of Bob Cady had presented herself, having crossed the Continent in quest of her lover, and arrived just in time to receive his corpse, and to swear on that bloody altar to avenge his death in the heart's blood of his murderer.

We have seen that Six-foot Si, a blonde giant, a nature's nobleman, a gentleman in the rough, had resolved to take the execution of this oath upon himself, to save the woman from this terrible act of reprisal.

Going from camp to camp in quest of Moran, he repeatedly ran across one particular man, whose interest in this subject at last arrested his attention.

"Why, he's pumpin' the boys. He's shootin' off his mouth free and keerless like; but when any one else talks he's a-takin' of it all in."

Instantly Six-foot Si's manner underwent a marked change. He had the keen, alert look of a sleuth-hound.

"I'm onto ye, pard," he muttered to himself. "Now hyar's fur to see what ye'r' worth, anyway."

From that moment he never lost sight of the talkative stranger.

When, later in the evening, he left the camp, Six-foot Si was at his heels, moving like a shadow.

At a little distance, he went to where a horse was picketed off the road, out of sight and earshot of any chance traveler.

Leading the animal back to the mountain thoroughfare, he mounted and rode away at a brisk trot.

Now, Six-foot Si was a regular Indian when it came to traveling on foot, and it had been his boast that, in a long chase, he could run the legs off of the best horse that ever swung under a saddle.

As the stranger evidently did not fear pursuit he did not press his horse, and so lost the advantage he would otherwise have had in a short race, in which, by taxing the powers of the animal, he could easily have outstripped the man.

Drawing up his belt another hole, bringing his fists up to his breast so that his elbows hugged his sides closely, and closing his lips hard, Six-foot Si set out at a long, swinging lope, which carried him over the ground at a much greater speed than it seemed to.

The steady, even play of his muscles reduced

the strain to the minimum, while his regular, deep inhalations, distributing the effort over all the muscles that operated his lungs, gave promise of long wind.

However, when he had run in this way for perhaps a mile, the veins in his neck were distended and throbbing with heavy pulsations, and it required a severe effort to keep his mouth shut so as to avoid panting.

Then he slowed down to a rapid walk, getting as much speed as possible out of strides as long as was compatible with ease of movement, while he still kept up his steady, deep breathing.

The effect of this maneuver was apparent at once. The circulation began to equalize. The fiery drumming in his head subsided, and a sense of renewed vigor diffused itself throughout his frame.

He was getting his second wind.

Then he resumed his old gait, only running with greater lightness and swiftness.

However, he was careful not to hurry, but kept himself well within the limit of his powers. It is the worried nag that soonest fails.

He was rewarded by again coming within earshot in the next mile.

But now he discovered that while out of hearing, his man had been joined by another.

A few minutes later he heard the clang of iron hoofs in his rear, as some one riding at full speed crossed a bit of rocky ground.

"Eh! more of the same sort?" ejaculated Si. "Seems to me, thar's a pile o' travel on this road to-night."

To step aside and wait for the rider to pass him would be to lose considerable ground.

"I'll do better'n that," said Si, to himself. "With their clatter an' bang, I reckon I kin steal a base on 'em."

So he ran lightly yet swiftly forward, keeping about midway between the two.

Again the sharp clang of the following rider rung out, so loud as to catch the ears of those in advance, and they instantly drew rein.

But a man can stop much more abruptly than a horse can be pulled up, so at the first indication of what he was on the lookout for, Six-foot Si halted and stepped aside into the covert.

Just then the melancholy hoot of an owl broke upon the night.

This was evidently a signal, for, coming to an abrupt halt, the following horseman responded with the musical note of a night-bird, which was promptly answered by those in advance.

He then passed Si at a gallop, and the three rode on in close confab.

The irregular pace of three horses would make it safe for Si to shorten the distance between him and the horsemen; and when they left the road, proceeding in single file along a bridle-path where they had to walk their horses, he felt secure in the shadow of the trees, and got close enough to overhear what was said.

"Waal, Hank," observed one of the men, "I don't feel so bad, bein's as you're in the same boat."

"No," said another. "When Hank Budlong can't pick up a trail, it's a cold day fur anybody else."

"Cheese it, Jack!" exclaimed the voice of the man in pursuit of whom Si had set out.

"Oh, I'm only follerin' Shorty's lead," replied the last preceding speaker.

"An' I didn't pitch the trump," added Shorty.

"Any o' the boys'll tell ye that."

"I done what I could," observed Hank, modestly. "I reckon some lucky chap has done a darn sight better."

"Ef they hain't," observed Jack, "we're a-gittin' on to Richmond fast!"

"How did you work the racket?" asked Shorty.

"Waal," answered Budlong, "I jest sot the ball to rollin', an' 'lowed to pick up all the company knowed, while they was waggin' their jaws."

"An' nobody had seen the ornery galoot?"

"Neither hide nor hair."

"Blast him! thar won't be hide nor hair of him left, ef we once git our flippers on him!"

Jack swore with a savageness which showed that he shared Shorty's animosity to the full.

Six-foot Si was puzzled by this dialogue.

"Ef I'm on the right trail, an' these hyar galoots is Moran's crowd, what air they shoutin' about?" he asked himself. "I 'lowed as that chap was givin' the boys a stiff, when he let on not to know whar Moran is, but he wouldn't keep it up with his own gang. Can it be as Joe has throwed off on 'em? Bet I'll know before daylight."

Presently the men reached an open glade, which was evidently a rendezvous, for they were eagerly greeted by others already on the spot.

As they had posted no sentry, it was plain that they feared no espionage, so Six-foot Si had no difficulty in creeping almost into their very midst.

Where he could hear everything that was said, he found a fallen tree, half-covered by the trunk of which he lay at length and listened.

The night was chilly, and the dampness of the woods from a recent rain-fall, made this anything but a cosy rendezvous.

Against this inclemency the boys had started

a small fire of fat pine, which now served to betray the features of any one who approached it to Six-foot Si.

"I'll jest spot you chaps," he said to himself, fixing his keen eyes upon the faces in turn, as they were most plainly revealed. "I'll want to know ye whenever an' wherever I see ye ag'in."

They were as precious a set of scoundrels as ever banded together to prey upon their fellows, and that night Six-foot Si photographed upon his memory a rogues'-gallery which was destined to be of inestimable value to him in the near future.

From the eagerness with which Hank Budlong was consulted, it appeared that he was the leading spirit of the company, and every one was greatly dejected by his report of failure.

"I tell ye what it is, pards," growled one of the disappointed men, "Moran never 'lowed to give us no show in this hyar thing."

"You bet he didn't," assented another. "He 'lowed to use us to git the cryptogram, an' then give us the dirty shake—that's what he done."

Whereupon the outlaws fell to swearing lustily at the rascal who had tricked them—a proceeding which may have afforded some relief to their feelings, but certainly did not otherwise better their situation.

Others kept dropping into the glade, until the slippery outlaw's whole party was assembled. Each in turn was eagerly questioned, and all told the same story of failure. In each instance every one present found but one relief—execration of Joe Moran.

"But what's to be done?" was at last demanded.

"More o' the same," said Hank Budlong, sentimentally.

"All right! Thar ain't no back-down in me."

"I'll see this thing through, ef I'm the last man on the ticket."

"While Joe Moran's above ground, I 'low to put in all my time on him!"

This sentiment seemed to receive universal indorsement.

Then Budlong assigned to each his further duty.

"The which I don't want nothin' better'n that," chuckled Six-foot Si. "I'll know whar to find you chaps when I want ye."

But now happened one of those concurrences of events which cannot be forecast and provided against.

The whole band of ruffians began to move preparatory to dispersion, when one of their number observed:

"I reckon I'll git a gad an' have it out with that ornery beast o' mine. He pitched the trump all the way hyar, but you bet yer sweet life he'll play to my lead goin' back, or he'll pass out."

The tree under which Six-foot Si was ensconced, was a hickory, that, by the combined action of a wash-out and the wind, had been thrown down, leaving a part of its roots uninjured. From the upper side of the trunk had started a lot of fresh roots, growing straight and supple, than which no better goad could be desired.

Looking about for a switch with which to discipline his horse, the ruffian stumbled upon these.

"Hyar's what I'm after, made to my hand," he muttered.

And, standing so close that his feet almost touched Six-foot Si's body, he proceeded to select what he wanted, more by the sense of touch than of sight.

Now, by his long run Six-foot Si had been thrown into a profuse perspiration, and he discovered, when it was too late to change his situation, that he had crept into a very damp berth.

Just as the unconscious ruffian approached him, he had the first symptom of taking cold.

"Forty million demons with forty million straws!" he ejaculated, internally, seizing his nose between the finger and thumb of both hands, and pressing with all his might on his mouth.

But it was of no use. The titillating sensation ran up and down and around. It tortured him until he felt as if he should burst. Then it waned so that he began to hope that he had conquered it.

But it returned with ten-fold intensity. He made a frantic effort to rally his forces, but the enemy burst through his lines, and the sneeze that signaled his utter rout was a perfect explosion.

The astonished ruffian leaped back with a muttered exclamation.

Knowing that his detection was past recall, Si scrambled to his feet, and stood looking at his dismayed enemy across the trunk of the fallen tree.

It was lucky for his future purpose that the interposition of foliage between him and the fire threw his face and figure in dense shadow, else he would have been betrayed to at least one of the outlaws where everything depended upon his remaining unknown.

"Hallow, Sam!" shouted a voice from the fire. "Did you go off thar by yerself to take snuff?"

But Sam was listening to something far more

formidable than this chaff. It was the deadly *click! click!* of Six-foot's Si's revolver.

"Hold on, boss!" he pleaded, in a low tone. "Don't shoot! You've got me."

"What's that you're growlin' about?" demanded his comrade.

It would have been impossible for Six-foot Si to utter a command without being betrayed by his voice.

Sam doubtless knew this, and he half-turned as if about to walk back to his companions. But, instead of doing this, he suddenly threw himself flat on the ground, so that his body lay at right angles to the line between him and Si, presenting the least conspicuous mark if the latter took it into his head to seek revenge by a shot.

As he fell, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Help! help! Hyar's a spy!"

Si had hoped only to hold the fellow to silence long enough to give him a few steps start of the mob he knew would be at his heels a moment later.

But this maneuver of the outlaw precipitated matters. There was nothing for it now but instant flight.

Without a word or a sound, Si bounded away at the greatest speed he dared to, with a pitfall hidden by the darkness at every step.

He had the advantage of having come to the spot on foot, while his enemies had come on horseback, but they "held over him," in that, guided by the sounds of his flight, they could fill the woods with random shots, any one of which might fetch him down.

They were not slow to avail themselves of this chance, and he was soon keeping step to the liveliest kind of music—the yells of a following horde of bloodthirsty outlaws, the spiteful cracks of their revolvers, and the zip and patter of bullets.

CHAPTER II.

REVENGE!

IN a shanty in Milligan's Bend sat a woman in every way remarkable.

In stature she was rather above the medium height, and her figure was rounded out, not with the voluptuous softness generally counted a charm in her sex, but with a harmonious muscular development such as the Greeks gave to the divine huntress.

Her face, never relieved by that tinging of the cheeks which often gives beauty at the expense of a sound constitution, was now such a dead white as to be in almost startling contrast with her raven black hair.

This effect was heightened by a wild gleam of the eyes which showed that her soul was stirred by some master emotion.

She sat as motionless as a statue, gazing straight before her into vacancy.

This was Beth Crawford, a girl who had crossed the continent, to find her lover dead, his body gashed with wounds every one of which cried out for vengeance on his treacherous partner, by whose ruthless hand he had fallen.

In spite of all remonstrance, she had sat alone beside that stark body, counting its livid wounds, and calling heaven to witness the justice of her resolve to requite them one by one.

She it was whom Six-foot Si sought to spare the haunting horror of remembrance, by taking upon himself the vindication of her wrongs.

With no knowledge of his interposition, she sat waiting the moment when she should go forth on her mission of revenge.

Then came a light step, a timid knock, a gentle opening of the door, and the soft rustle of a woman's garments.

Beth did not move or give any outward sign of consciousness, yet she knew without looking up that her visitor was the wife of Colonel Dangerfield, popularly known as "Iron Despard."

A moment's hesitation, and the lady glided forward and twined her arms about the neck of the silent sufferer, pressing her tear-wet cheek against one that knew no such heavenly balm.

"Beth, my sister!"

"Mrs. Dangerfield."

The latter spoke with cold impassivity, unresponsive by tone, look, or gesture, to the impassioned overtures of her visitor.

"Do not repulse me so, dear!" breathed Mrs. Dangerfield.

"I have done with all humanizing influences," responded Beth, grimly. "Bring me that which will steal my soul to mercy, and I will welcome you."

"Ah! but you must forego all that—for your own sake, for all our sakes. We love you, and pity—"

"I want none of it!" cried Beth, rising, and fairly pushing Mrs. Dangerfield from her.

"Pardon me," murmured the lady, seeing her mistake when it was too late.

"It is nothing," said Beth, coldly. "Only your efforts are mistaken. I suppose it was you who set the minister on me."

"Indeed it was not!"

"Who, then, is so much interested in my affairs?"

"If it has given you offense, I should rather not tell you. It was well meant."

This had been Six-foot Si's first effort to dissuade the woman from her revenge.

"As you please," said Beth, indifferently.

"And yet," pursued Mrs. Dangerfield, wistfully, "I hoped that he would be able to say something—"

"It is not his fault," interrupted Beth, "that he is a young man, with much yet to learn outside of books."

"His heart—"

"The trouble is with his head."

Mrs. Dangerfield sighed, beginning to realize the hopelessness of the task she had undertaken, after two such opposite characters as the callow young divine and the battle-scarred Iron Despard had failed.

"But my husband," she faltered.

"Has the wisdom to know when to desist. I am grateful to him for his forbearance, as well as for his friendly purpose."

"Can I do nothing for you?"

"You can truly oblige me by abandoning this subject. I am fully resolved."

"One word further. How can you find him? You have never seen him."

"I have pored over this until I know his features better than those of my dead lover!"

And Beth drew from her bosom a tin-type likeness of Bob Cady and his treacherous partner.

Then, with an accession of fierceness that made her muscles grow rigid and her eyes blaze, she pursued:

"You see that the way has been opened by a Will not mine."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Dangerfield, shocked at this unexpected interpretation of events.

"Why else was that placed in my hands?" insisted Beth. "It was the last thing he sent me."

"You must not! Indeed, dear, it is wicked to so—"

"Listen!" interrupted Beth, so sternly that the words of remonstrance died upon the lips of the gentler woman.

Timidly Mrs. Dangerfield looked up at her, standing tall and dark and terrible, like some savage priestess of Druidical superstition.

"Something of your life has reached me by current report," pursued Beth. "But one has only to look into your face, to see that you know what it is to love and to suffer."

"Ah, yes!" breathed the listener, with a sad shake of the head.

"Then you can follow me with some appreciation. You know Robert Cady only as a miner, rough-clad, rude in speech and manner, perhaps. I know him as a farmer-boy, with none of the graces of culture, but strong of limb, warm of heart, and free of hand—the lightest dancer, the fleetest runner, the scoutest wrestler—everybody's friend, a believer in everybody. No woman ever had a truer lover, a braver defender. I loved him! You know what that means."

"Do I not?"

"And yet, when, fretting under the iron yoke of poverty, he got the gold fever, and proposed to make his fortune in a twelvemonth in the mines, I let him go! Oh, that was the bitter mistake of my life! For five years I waited. His return was always a little in the future, when he had made a fortune he was ever on the point of achieving. I know now that it was that accursed cryptogram that led him on and on, until hope died in my breast. You wonder that I do not join in your tears. I have wept till the fountains of despair dried at their source. God knows if I shall ever shed tears again!"

"Well, five years wrought changes in my life. An unexpected bequest made me my own mistress. Robert's letters had become almost incoherent, in their abrupt alternations between wild hope and reckless despair, and finally ceased altogether. I was almost crazed with anxiety, lest something had befallen him. I could endure it no longer. I came to him. You know what I found. I was six hours too late for a word, a sign! Now prate to me about resignation, forgiveness, love of enemies! I'll kill him!"

Her eyes blazing, her nostrils dilating and quivering, these concluding words passed her lips like flames that would sear all they fell upon.

Mrs. Dangerfield covered her face with her hands and shuddered.

Beth walked away from her, and resumed her old seat and her old posture of stony resolve.

It was impossible to intrude upon her again with words that seemed a mockery. Mrs. Dangerfield, with a delicacy rare among people who are bent upon "doing good," stole out of the room without further molesting her.

To her husband, as she recounted her experience, she said:

"I never saw anything so terrible. The tide of her passion was like a resistless torrent—I was swept along by it in utter helplessness."

"She must run her course," replied Iron Despard, with a sad, far-away look in his eyes.

"We all have to."

His wife wound her arms about him in brooding tenderness, and whispered:

"We are safe, dear!"

He put his hand upon her cheek, and pressed her face close to his, as he responded, in a deep voice:

"Thank God!"

So, heart to heart, they rested in eloquent silence, till the twilight stole upon them unaware.

When it had deepened into darkness, Beth Crawford arose, left the shanty which a compassionate miner had given up to her occupancy, and with slow step climbed an acclivity to a spot which was known as "the Hight Lot."

Several mounds of earth ranged in a row told that this was the burial-place of the camp.

All of the men who there slept their last sleep had died "with their boots on!"

A little apart from these a newly-formed mound stood by itself. Beside it the motionless figure of the woman loomed tall and spectral in the darkness.

She may have stood there an hour, as if carved in stone, when she was startled by a voice saying:

"It's beggin' yer pardon, mum!"

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE WOLF'S DEN!

WITH a quick movement Beth's right hand disappeared in the folds of her dress. Otherwise she did not stir.

Looking across the grave, whence the voice came to her, she could dimly discern the outlines of a man, who stood hat in hand.

"Who are you?" she demanded, quietly.

"You'll excuse me, mum, but I ain't a-givin' of myself away tell I see whether I kin strike a bargain with ye."

"Come to the point at once, then."

"It's jest this hyar. Some o' the boys 'lows as ye have it in ye fur to lay fur Joe Moran an' come back at him fur all he's worth."

"Do you mean, that I am resolved to seek revenge?"

"That's it, mum, in better shape than I could put it."

"They are right. Now, why do you interfere?"

"Waal, ye see, mum, bein's as you air a woman, mum, I had a notion that maybe ye wa'n't goin' the hull figur'."

"You were mistaken. I am going the whole figure."

"Do you mean—beggin' yer pardon, mum—kill?"

"Yes, I mean kill!"

"Then you're the man fur my money!"

"Without more words, why are you here?"

"Waal, ye see, Joe Moran is the dirtiest white man in this hyar section o' country. He's wound up by shakin' the crowd what fit, bled and died fur to help him git them papers."

"Of which company you are one?"

"Was one, ef you please!"

"Why have you separated from them?"

"That's all along o' Hank Budlong, the which I hain't no use fur the like o' him, fur sour apples! Hank an' the boys is layin' fur Joe, jest wild. They 'low to salivate him bad, ef they kin git their flippers on him. Waal, they hain't got him yit, an' what's more, I have!"

"And you are willing to sell your knowledge?"

"I'm 'lowin' to sell out Hank Budlong an' his crowd. Then I ain't over sweetish on Joe Moran."

"You shall be amply rewarded," interposed Beth, panting with eagerness.

"Ef you're a mind to divvy up when you strike your pile, o' course I'm agreeable. Money don't sour on my stomach—I will say that."

"But I must have some assurance of your good faith. How do I know that you're not a tool in the hands of Joe Moran, plotting my destruction, as he effected that of my lover?"

The man scratched his head, puzzled.

"Waal, I dunno, mum," he said. "I never thought o' that. I reckon you couldn't git nobody in this hyar section o' country fur to go my bail fur good character an' sich. I'm a tough one, an' that's a fact."

"Come! we will dispose of that difficulty. I will trust to my ability to watch you."

"Git the drop on me, mum, an' bore me ef you see anythin' crooked."

"I will take you at your word. Now, how soon can you show me Joe Moran?"

"Right off the top o' the deck! He's layin' low at Bloody Run."

"How am I to get there?"

"Ef you start now, you kin ketch the up stage at Biles's."

"I am ready."

"It's only fair fur to give you the tip about Bloody Run, before you put yer foot in it. It's the toughest hole in this hyar section o' country, the which thar don't none worser lay outdoors!"

"I care nothing for the character of the place. I'm not looking for a paradise among such men as you!"

"You hit me off, mum, from the ground up. Still, you'd better see the swath you're bound to cut ef you git away with the Run."

"Very well. If you insist, you can relieve your mind as we go along."

And without more ado, Beth set a pace back to camp that waked her companion up.

"The Run," he said, "is a sink-hole fur all the hard citizens what gits bounced from everywhar else. Ef a man has done anythin' to make angels weep, that's his recommend at Bloody Run. No sheriff's posse ever brought their man out o' thar, an' mighty few has ever gone in thar an' come out ag'in with hull skins.

"Joe Moran went thar, knowin' that, when he told 'em that he'd killed his pard, they'd cotton to him, an' stick by him, too, till the last dog was hung, ag'in' ary crowd that he had sharpened."

"Well, in the face of this, I say again—Show me Joe Moran!"

"Marm, I like yer grit—I do, fur a fact! Ef we don't have a ring in Joe Moran's nose before he's a gran'father—"

"One word! What is your name?"

"Migglesie, mum. That's a handle what ye kin grip easy."

"Well, Mr. Migglesie, at the outset let it be understood that I always do things in my own way, and that I brook no interference from anybody. When I have need of you, I will call upon you. You do my bidding, but you keep your mouth shut unless in answer to a direct question. I want neither suggestions nor assurances from you."

"Marm, you lead off at me with a stiddy nerve. When I sized you up, I 'lowed as thar was grit in your make-up, an' grit thar is. Ef you say it's a lone hand, you bet Migglesie ain't the pard to—"

"Enough! We are wasting breath."

Beth pressed on, even more rapidly, impatient at the slightest intimation of "partnership" with such a scoundrel.

Migglesie admired her the more for this rebuff.

There is a kind of dogs—two-legged mongrels—that are made the stauncher adherents by the kicks of a master, and Migglesie was a choice specimen of the breed.

When Beth dismissed him peremptorily, he took off his hat to her with profound respect.

"Ef that thar gal don't snatch Mr. Joe Moran bald-headed," he reflected, "jest call on me fur the drinks."

But on second thought Beth recalled him, and looked him over sharply.

"Are you well-known to this Moran?" she asked.

"Waal, I reckon not," answered Migglesie, wondering what was coming.

"Have you a personal acquaintance with him? How much has he seen of you?"

"Mighty little. I'm Budlong's man. Hank let us out to Moran at so much a head."

"Could you disguise yourself so that there would be no chance of Moran's recognizing you?"

"As easy as rollin' off a log, mum."

"Don't undertake it if there is a possibility of failure. Everything may depend upon this."

"Go it blind, mum. You can't lose nohow. I traveled one't a hull year, doin' the wire-pullin' fur the Great Wizard o' the East, an' you bet I'm up to all sorts o' monkey business."

"Then, thar ain't nobody in these diggin's what has ever seen me with the hair off my mug. Give Wing Lee one whack at my jaw, an' Hank Budlong himself won't know me from his gran'mother. After that, let me have three or four days—ef that'll do ye—fur to grow stubble, an' I'll turn out the sweetest-lookin' tramp you ever did see."

"Very well. Present yourself at Bloody Run one week from to-day. You are not to appear to have anything to do with me, or even to know me, but you are to watch for an opportunity to see me away from the Run where our interview will not be observed, and I will then give you your instructions."

The first step in her campaign against Joe Moran thus taken, Beth procured a horse for herself and an escort to Biles's, where she made a successful connection with the stage, and from this point went on to Bloody Run alone.

When the stage-driver learned her destination, he dropped his jaw in amazement.

"Beggin' yer pardon, marm," he said, with evident embarrassment, "thar must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," was Beth's quiet assurance.

"But, Bloody Run, marm! You don't mean Bloody Run?"

"With your permission, that is just what I do mean."

"Waal, o' course you know yer own business best, but ef you will pardon one as is only meanin' to befriend ye, thar don't no ladies stop at Bloody Run—leastways, none o' your sort, marm."

"I shall make a beginning, then. I have heard that the place has just the climate suited to my needs, and while I go quietly about my own affairs, troubling no one, I am not afraid that any one will molest me. You men of the West are noted for your courtesy to women."

The stage-driver coughed with embarrassment. But he persisted in making one last effort.

"Ef it's health ye're after, jest ary place at all around hyar fur fifty mile is as like the Run as two peas. It's the galoots what hangs out thar

as makes the place—Waal, it ain't no garden spot, you bet!"

"It has the balsamic mountain air and beautiful scenery. That is enough for me."

"Waal, blow me!" was the driver's reflection, as he subsided into silence.

And when Beth prepared to dismount from the coach, she quickly saw, by the blank stares of astonishment on the faces of the loungers before the Bucking Burro, that the denizens of the place shared the driver's unflattering opinion of them and their town.

But she had little time for these general reflections. In the man who advanced to assist her to alight, with all the parade of deference for which the Western mining-camp is noted, she recognized the original of one of the figures on the tin-type, which she had studied with the eyes of love, and later with the eyes of hate.

At sight of him she was overcome by a sickening sense of loathing, and felt as if she should not be able to conquer the impulse to shrink from him in shuddering repulsion.

CHAPTER IV.

A TWO-LEGGED BURRO.

"Don't let him git away with ye, fellers! Down him on sight!" shouted Hank Budlong, as the outlaws under his command set out in full cry after Six-foot Si. "It may be Moran himself, or that sneak, Slippery Pete. Ef he ain't standin' in with Moran, I don't know his leetle game. Whoever it is, we want his carcass worse'n ary thing else about him."

It may be to the enlightenment of the reader, to observe in passing that Slippery Pete was none other than our friend Migglesie. Apparently frank with Beth Crawford, he was not putting himself needlessly in her power.

Meanwhile, with yells of fury the outlaws sought to carry out the order of their leader to the best of their ability.

But Six-foot Si knew a thing or two about woodcraft. They did not get sight of him, and his only danger was from random bullets.

To be sure, they filled the woods so full of these that this peril was not insignificant, but Si was so light of foot that he increased the distance between him and his foes at every bound, and besides, as soon as the rout was fairly going, so that the noise they made covered the sound of his flight, he deflected from the line on which they had set out.

Indeed, his escape seemed virtually accomplished, when a trip over a protruding root sent him crashing to the ground.

He struck his knee upon a stone, and felt an excruciating pain dart up to his hip, while his foot became numb and lifeless.

"Hyar's a pretty fix!" he said to himself, not losing his coolness, as many a man in such a strait would have done. "I reckon I'm used up, fur this heat, at least."

Instead of trying to scramble to his feet, he rolled over on his back, and made an effort to lift his foot in the air and work the knee-point.

"No go," was his instant verdict. "I've got to put up fur repairs, an' that's flat. That ain't an easy thing in the enemy's country, especially when they're hot on yer trail. But needs must when the devil drives, so hyar goes fur a bluff. Ef they nose me out we'll see what kin be done about it."

So, quickly yet quietly rolling over and over, he placed his body alongside of a fallen tree-trunk, and waited in perfect stillness.

On came his pursuers, with the chance of some one of them stepping upon him. But then there was a chance of their passing him by, and leaving him in safety.

It turned out that they did neither, quite.

The first headlong rush of the pursuit was soon over. As they did not overtake the spy in the opening spurt, the men saw that this plunging blindly in the darkness would avail nothing. It was almost as likely that he was behind them as before.

But now transpired a fact of which Six-foot Si had been ignorant, and which proved that his accident was rather fortunate than otherwise.

It appeared that there was but one exit from the glade in which the rendezvous had been held; further, that the instant the alarm was given, one of the horsemen, who was already on the way out, had spurred straight to the defile, to intercept the escape of the spy.

Had Six-foot Si kept on, the trend of the activities which encompassed the pocket would have pressed him into this defile, where a brace of six-shooters, with a "bad" man behind them, lay in wait for him.

He now lay and listened to the men calling to one another, and they opened his eyes to the trap into which he had walked.

"Hallo! hallo! hallo!" shouted Hank Budlong, to attract attention. "Has anybody got the defile?"

"You bet!" came the response.

"Is that you, Maddern?"

"It ain't anybody else."

"You air sure he hasn't got through?"

"Not unless he's got longer legs than my leetle mare—an' I had the start of him, at that."

"Hold yer own. Lay low!" commanded Budlong. "We'll smoke him out o' hyar yit."

He then called to the others of his followers.

"Boys, thar ain't no use in cavortin' around in the dark. He can't give us the slip unless he kin bolt Billy Maddern, an' I'll resk that. Go back to the fire an' git torches. We'll beat this hull pocket from now till mornin', but we'll rout him out."

"Waal, hyar's a purty prospect!" mused Six-foot Si. "I reckon I might as well foller the lead o' Davy Crockett's coon!"

But Six Foot Si never threw up his hand. His motto was—play it out!

It chanced that the recall of their leader arrested two of the men in his immediate vicinity.

One of them grumbled in savage discontent, and the other said to him, laughingly:

"Don't swear, Jimmy, or you won't ketch no fish."

"Cass, is that you?"

"I'm all hyar."

"Waal, so am I, but not in very good shape."

"What's the matter?"

"I've about stove the daylights out o' me."

"Heard something drop, eh?"

"I run plumb into a blasted tree."

"The tree is the one to squeal, then. It was a-standin' thar, not doin' nothin' to nobody."

"Waal, now I'm goin' to set hyar, not doin' nothin' to nobody, until I git my wind a bit."

And groping his way to the fallen tree beside which Six-foot Si lay, he sat down directly over the fugitive, fortunately with his feet on the opposite side of the trunk.

"I reckon it'll stand most of us in hand to make tracks fur them firebrands," suggested Cass. "The boss ain't an overly patient man when he gits waked up."

"Hang his patience!" grunted Jimmy, nursing his hurts. "What did he git up sich a scare-crow idee as this hyar fur, anyway? I'm about sick o' the hull business."

"All right, my covey. That's your privilege. But I hain't got no call fur to stand hyar gassin' with you; so, ta! ta!"

And he made off as fast as the circumstances would allow, leaving Jimmy to get what satisfaction he could out of his "kicking" by himself!

In a flash, Six-foot Si saw his one chance.

He did not wait for Cass to get far away, fearing that Jimmy might take it into his obstinate head to follow him, but, drawing his revolver, he set the nerves of the astonished grumbler to tingling at the sound of the sharp *click! click!* of the raising hammer, and at the same time arrested any attempt at flight or aggression, by saying, in a low, but very decided tone:

"Hold on, pard! I've got you."

Jimmy uttered a dismayed oath.

"Who be you, boss?" he asked, in an unsteady voice.

"That's nothin' to you," replied Si. "Jest you throw up yer hands, an' we'll talk the matter over later."

"I cave," said Jimmy, obeying promptly.

Si lifted himself as best he could, and quickly disarmed his prisoner, throwing his weapons away, as he had no use for them.

"Now, my Christian friend," he went on, "we hain't got much time to talk, so I can't repeat nothin' that I say. Ef you furgit it, so much the worse fur you."

"You kin tie to me, boss," interposed Jimmy, who proved to be a coward, which was not out of keeping with the disposition to skulk he had betrayed.

"You hold yer yawp, and let me do the chinin'," was Si's sharp command. "Now, see hyar!—I've hurt my leg so's I can't walk, an' you've got to be my burro, fur to pack me out o' hyar. Jest you don't disremember this—no burro never bucks with me twice! You kin throw me easy, ef you want to, when the pinch comes, but you'll pass out a-doin' of it!"

By way of impressing this point, he pricked it into the neck of his prisoner with his bowie.

"All right, boss!" quavered Jimmy. "I'll do what I kin, but we can't git by Billy Maddern. He's a corker, I tell you!"

"You hain't got nothin' to do with Billy Maddern. Jest you look out fur a galoot what hails to the name o' Jimmy."

And without more ado, Six-foot Si got upon the back of his human burro, putting a very tight arm about his neck, while he held the point of his bowie in readiness for instant use in case of treachery.

Holding his burden in place by the legs, Jimmy rose to his feet with some difficulty, since Six-foot Si was no trifling weight.

"Now," instructed Si, "you make a bee-line fur that defile, an' don't you git lost on the way, nor lose no time, or you'll hyear from yours truly."

"But Billy'll bore the both of us on sight, when he sees what I'm a-doin'," urged Jimmy.

"When you git anigh Billy, an' before he has a chance to challenge you, you call to him, not loud enough fur the others to hyear, ye onderstand. Then you lean me up ag'in' a tree, an' you make some excuse to git him to go back to the rendezvous, while you stay hyar an' guard the pass."

"What'll I say to him, boss?"

"You know him better'n I do, an' kin handle him better. Only, ef you fail, up you go!"

That set Jimmy's wits to work, and he was not lacking in a certain crafty knowledge of human nature, as he proved.

Stumbling down the path leading to the defile, as if in a great hurry, he called out:

"Hey, Billy! Billy Maddern, whar be ye?"

"Who goes thar?" Is that you, Jimmy Kenney?" came the response.

"You bet it is—what thar is left o' me. Say, Billy, the Cap's a-wantin' of you, hot foot. I'm to hold the fort down hyar. Ye hain't seen nothin' yet, have ye?"

"Wantin' o' me? What's the Cap wantin' me fur?"

"I'll never tell ye. But he's madder 'n a wet hen about somethin'. Ef a galoot of about your size don't git a curryin' down before you're much older, I lose my guess."

Now this was very cleverly put. It roused Maddern's resentment, and by so much blunted his natural shrewdness.

"I reckon I hain't done nothin' that he should be kickin' about," he growled.

"That's your own lookout," replied Jimmy, indifferently. "You settle that with him. But I reckon he won't improve none by keepin'. I'll squat down right hyar, an' keep out o' the way o' stray bullets, fur that thar galoot, whoever he is, may have a keerless way with him."

The fact was that, while speaking, Jimmy Kenney had stopped beside a tree, and let Si off his back to the ground. But he was not released from the iron grip of his captor, and he felt the keen point of his bowie just between his shoulder-blades.

He squatted down in order to give Si a like opportunity, which would make their discovery less likely.

Billy Maddern growled something unintelligible—probably an oburgation against his leader, which he did not care to have reach other ears—and set out to obey the supposed command.

"See that you don't let the galoot steal by you an' git that hoss o' mine," he said. "I reckon I'd better take the beast back with me."

"Ef he gits by me," replied Jimmy, "thar won't be nobody alive in this hyar gulch fur to stop him takin' anythin' he has a notion to."

Billy hesitated, but the sound of excited voices in the direction of the fire decided him to lose no more time.

Everybody knew that Hank Budlong's temper was not the most reasonable when he was "riled."

Maddern was not yet out of hearing when Six-foot Si said:

"You done that better 'n I 'lowed you would."

"I was workin' fur a hull hide, boss," replied Jimmy. "But I've put my foot in it. This hyar won't be a healthy country for me, after this. Budlong won't take no excuses fur what I've done."

"You won't stay to give him none," answered Si. "Now, mind yer eye—no trippin'. Forward march!"

"What do you 'low to do with me, boss?"

"Don't you borry no trouble about that. I'm goin' to take the best kind o' care o' you."

There was no time to lose. The moment Maddern reported to his captain, the deception would be detected, and the whole band of outlaws would be pouring toward the defile.

Si made his burro carry him to Maddern's horse, where both mounted, Jimmy in front.

Then away out of the defile, the sandy road-bed close at hand deadening the sound of their horse's hoofs.

But they had not got out of ear-shot, when they heard a concerted yell from the direction of the fire, and knew that all was discovered.

"Now," said Si, in firm tones, "I'll handle these hyar ribbons."

And reaching round his captive, he grasped the reins, and thus assumed control of the horse they rode.

In spite of the pain in his knee, he urged the animal to his highest speed for perhaps a quarter of a mile, when he branched off from the road, plunging into a bridle-path to the left.

Then began a scrambling climb, over a way that seemed designed for nothing but a mountain goat. Higher and higher they rose, until they heard the sounds of pursuit far below them.

"We've shook them like rollin' off a log," observed Kenney.

"We ain't done yet," replied Si. "Your work, my Christian friend, has jest begun."

He then dismounted, tied the horse, and went on:

"We can't use him any further than this. Now you've got to play burro ag'in."

There was no use in growling. Whatever he felt, Jimmy submitted himself to his task.

Mounted on his back, Six-foot Si was carried along a ledge which skirted the mountain, the way fortunately being much better than that which they had just passed.

From time to time the human burro was granted a breathing-spell, and they so proceeded until broad daylight.

Six-foot Si now bound his prisoner with strips torn from his own garments, and they both slept for an hour, Jimmy Kenney, as you may believe, without rocking.

Having no breakfast, they reinforced their flagging powers with a pull from Jimmy's canteen, and resumed the tedious task that had consumed the night.

By the middle of the afternoon, Jimmy stretched himself at length on his back, and wished himself dead.

"It ain't no use, boss," he pleaded. "I can't move another step. I'm played out, I tell ye!"

Like a prudent master, Six-foot Si had been as considerate as possible with his "burro." But he had gauged Jimmy's strength very closely, and had not permitted him to shirk his work.

"You've done nobly," he said, with grim humor, "an' we're nearly through. But you've got to stick it out a mite longer. Take another pull at the canteen."

"Whar air we goin' to? What air you goin' to do with me?" whined Jimmy, querulously.

"That's what you asked before," replied Si, dryly, and paid no further attention to the demand.

Jimmy drank his whisky in despair, and throwing himself back, stretched his arms above his head with a sigh.

In a moment he was snoring like one dead-beat.

Si let him rest, while he proceeded to rub his own knee. Without being dangerously injured, it was in no condition for immediate use.

"That'll cost me two days at the least calculation," reflected Si, "jest when I can't afford the time, nohow."

But nature pays no heed to human exigencies. If all his future depended upon immediate action, he must forego it.

Having roused his burro, he proceeded to blindfold him.

"Boss!" cried Jimmy, dismayed at this last requirement, "have I got to lug you with my eyes shut?"

"I reckon," replied Si.

"How fur?"

"Until I tell you to quit."

"Waal, I might as well give it up now."

"Not quite."

"I can't do no more."

"We'll see about that."

And Si coolly drew forth his bowie, and put its point where he thought it would do the most good.

The result proved his wisdom.

"Hold on, boss!—hold on! I'll try it a spell longer," was Jimmy Kenney's hurried assurance.

Blindfold, the way seemed interminable to him, and indeed it was no easy task to bear such a burden for two hours, with short intervals of rest, where almost every step had to be guided by the direction of another.

Jimmy stumbled about, growling and groaning, but he made his destination at last, knowing absolutely nothing as to where he had come.

When the bandage was removed, he found himself in a cave.

There were evidences of past occupancy—a fire-place, a bed, and provisions.

These last were most welcome, and both men did ample justice to them.

Then, without asking a single question, the exhausted "burro" stretched himself out, and went fast asleep.

He did not know when Six-foot Si put him again in bonds, so that he himself might sleep without the danger of awaking to find the tables turned upon him, and his burro in the saddle.

CHAPTER V.

FAST BIND, FAST FIND.

FOR two days Six-foot Si virtually lay on his back, doing nothing but bathe his knee with hot water. At the end of that time he was himself again.

Meanwhile, Jimmy Kenney had a plenty to eat and drink, and nothing to do, by way of compensation for his recent drudgery.

During the day, while they were awake, he was free from bonds, and privileged to move about the chamber in which Six-foot Si lay, within certain prescribed limits.

Having the munitions of war in his possession Si knew how far it was safe to trust his prisoner, with a certainty of being able to bring a dash for liberty to an abrupt and final termination.

Jimmy had already shown that he had a respectful consideration for deadly weapons in the hands of a man who knew how to use them, and Si was disposed to give him all the liberty consistent with his own interests.

But when they slept, Jimmy had the securest kind of bonds in the place of a night-cap.

Again and again he appealed to Si to know what was to be done with him, but Si always intimated that sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof, and that it would be better for him to learn his fate as he went along, as we all have to.

He found that he was confined in a cavern which had several passages leading out of the chamber which they occupied, but as Si seemed to guard especially but one of the corridors, he inferred that this was the only exit to the open air.

At the end of the second day, Si proved that he had regained perfect use of his injured knee, and then for the first time spoke in the energetic tones of a man who was at last ready for action.

"Now," said he, briskly, "we'll go to work."

"Anythin' fur a change," responded Jimmy, and indeed it was a relief from his long suspense.

He was soon to learn that change is not necessarily improvement.

Each bearing a torch, Si made his prisoner walk before him down a corridor, directing him which course to take as they came to succeeding ramifications.

"This hyar's a reg'lar honeycomb," remarked Jimmy, before they had gone very far.

"It's an easy place to git lost in," answered Si, so grimly that Jimmy felt cold shivers creep up and down his back, as he gazed anxiously about.

"But you know it like a book, boss, don't ye?" he asked, with a wistful grin.

"I know it well enough to look out fur myself," was the consoling response, "but I might not be able to find anythin' as I'd lost in hyar, ef so be it was a troublesome thing to have about."

"Ye ain't meanin' to lose me, boss, be ye?" asked the prisoner, glancing at his torch as if he were weighing the chance of his companion blowing it out, and leaving him in the dark.

"Oh, no," replied Si, so positively that there might be a double meaning in his words, "I ain't 'lowin' to lose you!"

In an inner chamber Si halted, and stuck his torch in a crevice in the rocky wall, instructing Jimmy to do the same with his.

In this part of the cavern there were many loose boulders lying about, and the walls were full of perpendicular cracks, so that with a lever other fragments could be detached.

Si had his prisoner assist him to roll a huge boulder before the mouth of one of the corridors, so that, a space wide enough for entrance of a man being left, the barricade could without much difficulty be completed by a single man on the outside.

It proved that this passage led to a small, cell-like chamber, from which there was no other exit.

Into this retreat Si next caused his prisoner to carry food and water sufficient to last a man several days.

"Hold on, boss!" pleaded Jimmy at this point, "air you 'lowin' fur to shut me up in hyar?"

"That's jest what I'm 'lowin'," answered Si.

"Don't do it—don't do it!" begged Jimmy. "This hyar's worse'n the stone pitcher!"—by which Jimmy meant the penitentiary.

"I hate to do it," admitted Si. "Ef it wa'n't fur the pure cussedness o' human natur', I wouldn't have to."

"But you don't have to. Tie me up anywhar else. I'll swear to anythin'!"

"No go!" objected Si. "I want to know whar to find you ag'in when I want you."

"But I'll go ravin' crazy in hyar, in the dark."

"Oh, no you won't, ef you don't want to. Take it cool, an' you'll come out all right."

"It's worse'n murder, boss. Maybe you hain't tried it, an' don't know."

"Worse'n murder, eh? That reminds me o' Bob Cady. Your crowd has got him in a tighter box than this."

"Not my crowd, boss. We didn't have nothin' to do with it. He went up the flum before we took a hand. We wa'n't in with Moran—honor bright—when he finished him off."

"It was only because he didn't ask you. I know you chaps. Hank Budlong an' the rest o' you has had a free rein a good while. Waal, I've snubbed one o' you up at last, an' that's a fact. No more chin-music. In you go!"

"But, boss, hold on, one heavenly minute!"

"Out with it, in short meter. I can't hang around hyar all day. I've lost too much time already."

"Ef they rub you out, nobody'll know whar I be. I'll starve to death in hyar!"

"Oh, no you won't. I'll look out fur that."

"But how'll they know? You may not have a chance to say boo!"

"It'll be along o' your crowd ef I don't."

"But that don't let me out, Cap. I ain't in the crowd now, so it won't be me after ye."

"Waal, it'll only make a difference of a day or so with you, ef they don't git away with me. I ain't the only one what knows about this cave, an' I'll leave word so's my pard'll know when he drops in."

"But ef they should happen to rub him out, boss!" urged Jimmy, his hair almost standing on end with grizzly fear.

"Oh, you want too many chances," said Si, impatiently.

"But it's only one life I've got, boss, an' I don't want to gamble it, nohow."

"Waal, you'll have to—that's all! You'll

learn to take the bitter with the sweet one o these days. Consarn your pictur!—I wish't I had you off my hands—I do, so."

"But I got you out of a dirty scrape, boss," pleaded Jimmy, catching at every available straw.

"Much thanks to your good-will!" scoffed Si.

"You mean to say that you got yourself out of a dirty scrape."

"An' into a worse one!"

"That's as you look at it. But, time's up. In you go. I'd let you have torches, but you'd use 'em to pry your way out."

"I swear I won't, boss! Leave me a light, do! That'll take the curse off a heap."

"Nixy!" was Si's inexorable refusal.

Jimmy read his immovable face. It was useless to measure his figure. Jimmy had done that at the outset, and made up his mind that there was nothing to be gained and much to lose by a struggle.

"By rights, I'd orter tie you," observed Si.

Rather hastily Jimmy walked into his prison, without further remonstrance. To be bound would render his situation tenfold more distressing.

Then Six-foot Si rolled the boulder against the mouth of the corridor, and piled other fragments upon it until it was impossible for any one within to make his way out.

"Now, pard," was the parting injunction, "you take the thing cool, an' you'll pull through all O. K., but you go to rampin' around, an' the fu'st thing you know you'll go rip-snortin' crazy."

"I reckon my goose is cooked, anyway," was Jimmy's despondent reply.

Then he listened to Si's retreating footsteps, until they died away in the echoing corridors.

Six Foot Si now resumed his search for Joe Moran.

After an interval of thirty-six hours, in which he met with no success, he returned to the cave to cheer Jimmy up, well knowing the horror of solitary confinement.

He found a prisoner who peered through the rocky barrier at him with glistening eyes, panting so with excitement that he could scarcely speak.

"Pard," he gasped, "you look mighty good, an' no mistake! This hyar place has been full o' spooks an' devils ever sense you went away. How long have you been gone, boss? About a week, I reckon."

"Why, it was only yesterday I left you."

"Yesterday! Oh, come, now!—you're a-jokin'!"

"Not a bit of it."

"Yesterday! Only one day?" cried the prisoner, more to himself than to his companion. "How long be you 'lowin' fur to keep me in hyar, boss? I reckon I'll be gray before the week's out."

"It won't seem so long when you git used to it."

"Used to it! I reckon I'll be a goner a long time before I git used to this hyar. Why, boss, you could wring the sweat out o' my clo's, jest because I hyeared you a-comin' along that thar passage, an' knowed I was goin' to see somebody ag'in."

"You'll enjoy it all the more after you git out," said Si grimly, "an' maybe it'll be a lesson to ye, an' turn yer feet out o' the way of iniquity."

"I don't want to be ketched in the like o' this ag'in—that's flat!" responded Jimmy. "But, say, boss, won't you let me out o' hyar, jest fur one blessed minute? It feels as if the air was solid in hyar. I can't breathe!"

After a moment's reflection, Six-foot Si set to work to remove the barrier.

When he was free once more, Jimmy Kenney wrung Si's hand, and almost shed tears of gratitude.

"Boss," he said, "it does feel good to be out whar thar is somebody ag'in. I 'lowed never to git out o' thar!"

He walked up and down the chamber, trying his limbs as one who had just been released from bonds. He talked incessantly, and with a tremulous delight that was pathetic to listen to.

This release and companionship were such a boon to him, that Six-foot Si, from mere compassion, resolved to sleep in the cave that night, and Jimmy submitted to his bonds with a grateful smile.

When on the morrow it was time to return to his confinement and solitude, he became despondent again.

"Don't stay too long, boss!" he pleaded, clinging to Si's hands. "My God! ef you only knowed what I think about while I'm alone."

"You'd better spend your time layin' out a new course fur the future," said Si. "Ef you do that, this hyar 'll be money in your pocket."

Jimmy was in a mood to take moral precept kindly.

"I will, boss," he promised humbly.

"It is mighty tough," mused Si, as he left the whimpering wretch. "But ef I was to let him off, he'd cut the dirt from under my feet in no time. Repentance don't stick with his kind. An' I ain't takin' no resk o' hevin' my work balked, ye onderstand. While Joe Moran is

above ground, I'm the man that must find him first."

It was the thought of Beth Crawford's wrongs that held him firm, when, if only his own interests had been at stake, he might have listened to the voice of compassion, and taken some risk.

That day he was more fortunate than before.

While prosecuting his search in a neighboring mining-camp, he ran across a man whom he recognized as one of the outlaws that he had outwitted at the rendezvous.

A little observation satisfied him that this man was covertly on the watch, which was evidence that Moran had not yet been found by his betrayed fellow-criminals.

"I reckon it wouldn't be a bad scheme ef I could shunt you chaps off the track," mused Si, a new thought beginning to take shape in his brain.

But before he quite got hold of the thread which led to what he was groping after, another, whom also he recognized, appeared upon the scene.

The instant he caught sight of this man, Si knew that some important step had been accomplished.

"He's found him!" he said to himself, at once.

"Then, while his blood began to tingle as if filled with needle-points, he proposed to himself:

"How kin I git hold of him before he lets on to this hyar other chap?"

His first plan was to force a quarrel upon the outlaw, and shoot him before he could communicate with his fellow.

This was a thoroughly Western scheme, and inconvenient men are not infrequently silenced in this way, wherever the bowie-knife and revolver are the chief a biters of personal disputes.

But, besides his dislike of anything that savored so much of cold-blooded murder, Si was given little opportunity to move in this direction.

A glance of intelligence passed between the two outlaws the moment they saw each other.

Then they began to figure to get away for a private conference unobserved.

It was lucky for Si that they were cautious rascals, or were carrying out the instructions of their superior with the literalness of Chinamen, for otherwise they might easily have affected to "scrape acquaintance," and held communication in the sight, though not in the hearing, of others, without rousing suspicion.

But they seemed to think it necessary that they should not be seen together, and so the one who had the intelligence to convey set out for a rendezvous, to which he was to be followed by the other.

"That gives me my show," reflected Si. "I'll make a third to their leetle party."

CHAPTER VI.

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE.

As it was getting dusk, Si had not much difficulty in effecting his purpose. Indeed, he was second at the rendezvous, and within earshot, when the remaining outlaw came up.

"Lal!" cried he who was bursting with news.

"You've spotted him!" interrupted the other, eagerly.

"You bet I have!" was the proud assurance.

"Whar, Ted?"

"At Bloody Run."

"No! You don't say!"

"Thar ain't a more likely place in the world."

"We're galoots not to think of it off-hand."

"But I reckoned he'd be layin' out-doors, somewhars, only droppin' into camp now and ag'in, when he was grub-struck."

"Waal, he's put up at Bloody Run as bold as brass, an' I reckon he 'lows as he kin stand us off by sheer cheek."

"An' the backin' o' the Bloody Runites!"

"O' course he counts them in, an' well he may. They do say as a chap what's only gilt-edged enough kin git backin' thar for all the camp's worth."

"It's an A1 place, ef you're only in with the crowd."

"You bet!"

"Waal, have you seen any o' the boys yet, an' let 'em into the thing?"

"Nary!"

"Then we'll hunt up Budlong right away."

"Will we?"

"Won't we?"

"Waal, that jest depends."

"Eh? What's the racket, Ted?"

Ted examined his companion with the glance of a hawk.

"What's the reason we won't?" the other had to ask, before he replied:

"Lal, you an' me has run together fur a good long spell."

"We have so, Ted."

"You've always found me a straight man, hain't you, Lal?"

"You bet! An' I've panned out on the squar' so fur, hain't I?"

"Yes, you have."

"Waal?"

"Ef you hadn't," pursued Ted, warily, "I wouldn't 'a' thought o' huntin' you up, as I have."

"What would you 'a' done, then, Ted?"

"I'd 'a' gone fur Budlong—maybe I would—by myself."

"Say, Ted! what air you a-gittin' through you, anyway? Come off the perch, pard. I'm a-waitin'."

"Lal, have you got the grit fur a leetle scheme what's got money in it?"

"You bet your sweet soul I have, ef you'll let me in along o' you."

"We've got to bluff the hull board."

"All right."

"Ef we don't take all the tricks, up goes our heels."

"I kin stand that, ef I think I see a show."

"Waal, then, suppose we don't go fur Hank Budlong, at all."

"What'll we do in the place of it?"

"Run a leetle game of our own."

"But how?"

"What's the reason that thar cryptogram ain't as good fur us two, as fur a dog-gone lot o' scalawags what hain't got the gumption to find one side o' Joe Moran?"

"Fur us two alone!"

"Why not?"

"It would be mighty good, ef we've got the gall to sling it."

"That's what I'm 'lowin', an' I reckon we have got the gall, as well as arybody else. Why not, I say?"

"Waal, I never thought o' that. Wait until I take it in a bit. Ye see, it's a purty sizable nip, an' we don't want to bite off more'n we kin chew."

"Can't we chew Joe Moran? Thar's two to one, an' I don't ask no better odds'n that of any man."

"But thar's the leetle joker, what you ain't countin' in."

"What leetle joker?"

"Slippery Pete an' Jimmy Kenney, what he's got standin' in with him."

"He ain't got neither o' 'em by him at Bloody Run, an' ef they ain't at his back when we call, they might as well be in Guinea, fur all the good they'll do him."

"Waal, ef we git away with the lot o' 'em, thar's Hank Budlong. We'll have to settle with him before we git shut o' the racket. You know he's jest a-b'ilin' about Pete an' Jimmy. Ef Jimmy hadn't sold us out that night, we'd 'a' nabbed Mr. Joe Moran, as sure as shootin'."

"Maybe we would, an' maybe we wouldn't. But thar's neither hyer nor thar with us. What we're after is our plunder, an' ef we kin git away with it, Hank Budlong kin whistle."

"It's our dancin' to his whistlin' as troubles me," put in Lal, with a grin.

"Air you skeered out?" demanded Ted, roughly. "'Cause, ef you be, I reckon I kin play a lone hand, even ag'in' Hank Budlong."

"No, I ain't skeered out!" maintained Lal, "but I 'low it stands a man in hand to see his way clear before he jumps into the drink."

"Waal, what do ye want clear'n this? We jumps onto Joe Moran, an' gobble up the cryptogram. Then we 'light out, an' it's jest as easy to steer clear o' Slippery Pete an' Jimmy Kenney an' the lot o' 'em, as to keep out o' the clutches o' Hank Budlong an' the crowd as stands in with him alone."

"When we git the cryptogram, kin we swing it?"

"Of course we kin! Why not, as well as anybody else?"

"Waal, hyar goes! I'm in, anyway!"

And Lal extended his hand, to close the agreement with a grip.

"Good fur you!" said Ted, not a little pleased.

"Ef you'll keep a stiff upper lip, we'll be bonanza kings yit."

But even as he prognosticated thus favorably of the future, he uttered an ejaculation of surprise and dismay, for, following close upon a dull, sodden thud, the man he held by the hand suddenly lurched forward, so as to fall heavily against his breast, whence he rolled to the ground without having uttered a sound.

A listener to the dialogue just detailed, Six-foot Si saw that he must act promptly and effectively, or the game would soon be out of his hands.

"These hyar cusses is such a treacherous lot," he reflected, "that each one is ready to go in on his own hook an' eucher his pards, ef he thinks he sees a ghost of a show. I've got to take in the hull gang, one by one, or among 'em they'll git away with me, sure."

He was not near enough to knock one of these men down and then jump for the other, and he was afraid of the risk of "holding them up" both at once, as the loss of one of them would spoil all.

There was, then, but one alternative to shooting one of them, a length to which he did not care to go; and that was, to have recourse to a stone.

Few people realize that, in the hands of a man who can throw it with accuracy, a stone is almost, if not quite, as deadly a weapon as a revolver.

Living where at any moment his life might depend upon the effective use of any weapon that lay at hand, Six-foot Si had practiced with all sorts of means of offense and defense, until

it would have been difficult to place him in a situation in which he would be wholly at a loss.

"It'll be lucky fur him ef he's got a thick skull," he mused, as he picked up a stone for this occasion. "I won't lay him out for keeps ef I kin help it, but they're crowdin' of me so that I'll have to take some chances."

He threw his missile, striking his man fairly in the back of the head.

He then stepped into view with a leveled revolver, and answered Ted's assurance, that if his companion would keep a stiff upper lip, they would be bonanza kings yet.

"Not jest yit, my Christian friend! This hyar's the joker what ye didn't count in yer deck."

"Who be you, an' what 're ye after?" demanded Ted, in dismay.

"Hands up!" commanded Si, "an' we'll talk that over more at our ease."

There was nothing for it but compliance. In the West, a man knows when he's down. Ted lifted his arms above his head.

Six-foot Si stepped forward, and deftly disarmed him, after which he stooped and relieved the unconscious Lal similarly.

"Now, then, who be you, an' what do you want of us?" asked Ted, again.

"It's lucky," said Si, waiving this question, "that I've got a rope by me, what I bought so's a friend o' mine an' me could talk without fallin' out over it."

And he unwound from his waist a rope which he had provided against his next interview with Jimmy Kinney.

"I reckon," he went on, "as this hyar'll make us behave like the best o' friends. It'll keep you from furgittin' your manners, an' I never quarrel with nobody."

"But what right have you to hitch on to me an' my pard the like o' this?"

"You must be a tenderfoot, though you don't have the look of it. When a man's been in this hyar country a spell, he l'arns that thar ain't but one measure of a man's rights out hyar, which the same is gall an' sand; an' them two is so much alike that you can't tell t'other from which until you've had a sight o' practice."

"Waal, ef you'll leave it to me, I should say as you've had a mighty sight o' practice with both!"

"You're right thar, pard. I've had dealin's with many a hard citizen before I seen you."

And from the cool way in which Si proceeded to tie his prisoner up while talking to him, this could readily be believed.

"Ef it'll suit you any better to put it another way," was Ted's next essay to come to an understanding, "what call have you to jump my pard an' me?"

"The usual call," replied Si. "I've ketched you up to rascality, an' I'm death on sich."

"You want to do it all yerself?" said Ted, snappishly.

"Like as not," was the undisturbed rejoinder.

And, stooping, Si proceeded to examine the man he had knocked senseless.

Lal's head proved to be of the desired thickness, and he was soon "kicking" to quite as little purpose as Ted had done.

Six-foot Si remorselessly marched them off to his cave, and imprisoned them as he had Jimmy Kenney.

"I'll have a reg'lar 'sylum hyar, ef this keeps on much longer," he reflected. "It's lucky I've got room enough fur Hank Budlong's hull band, if necessary."

It was some consolation to Jimmy Kenney to know that henceforth he was to have companions in his misery, but he was not allowed to see them, nor was he told who they were.

They in turn were told nothing about Jimmy. Si left them to find out if they could.

Having made all secure, he set out at once for Bloody Run.

When he had been gone some time, Jimmy Kenney made an effort to learn who his fellow-prisoners were.

Putting his mouth to an opening between the rocks that shut him in, he cried:

"I say, pard, who be you, anyway?"

But the echoing cavern muffled his voice so that its articulations were indistinguishable.

Ted heard the voice, and called out in return:

"Who's hyar?"

This reached Jimmy's ears so smothered that he could not even recognize the voice, though Ted was well known to him.

Raising his voice, he made another attempt, shouting:

"Hallo!"

The intonation made this intelligible, and the response came:

"Hallo yerself!"

After many attempts to establish intercommunication, it was at last found that this was the only thing that could be exchanged intelligibly. The cavern swallowed up all articulations.

So, from time to time as the hours dragged along, these prisoners broke the dead silence and relieved somewhat the horrible loneliness of their entombment in the bowels of the earth, by exchanging this hail.

A stranger entering and listening, might have thought this a lunatic asylum!

CHAPTER VII.

A LADY IN THE CAMP.

JOE MORAN'S entrance into the privileges of citizenship at Bloody Run was noteworthy in one respect.

Having invited the whole camp up to the bar at his expense, he addressed them in this wise:

"Gents, I've hyeared tell o' this hyar camp, an' what I've hyeared tell has led me to allow as this hyar is about the place I'm lookin' fur. That's what brung me hyar, an' ef she pans out anythin' like what they let on fur fifty or a hundred miles around, I reckon I'll chip in along o' you fellers, an' leave you to freeze me out when you make up yer minds as you're a-losin' money along o' my bein' hyar."

"Waal, that jest depends," said Dandy Dave, speaking for the camp, as was his wont. "What mought you have hyeared tell of we-uns?"

"They do say as a galoot don't have to show up no certificate o' character when he 'lows to hang up hyar."

"So fur, so good. Drive ahead. Thar's many another camp in the same fix."

"Ef so be he fetches a sheriff's posse at his heels—"

"He's jest the man we want to see!" interrupted Dandy Dave, quickly.

"An' ef it's only Judge Lynch, an' a leetle army from a neighborin' camp—"

"So much the better. He must 'a' been up to somethin' spicy, an' it's live men as we're wantin'."

"That's what I hyeared," pursued Joe. "An' as how the sheriff what come in hyar was like to learn a thing or two before he got out ag'in."

"You bet! The same man never comes twice!"

"An' Judge Lynch's army—"

"They camps on the outside, or they gits took in an' done fur."

"Waal, gents, I've been a-havin' of a purty rackety time fur a few days past, as you're like to learn before long, an' I'm allowin' to run to cover, so's I kin sleep nights without feelin' as if my skin was goin' to be made into a strainer before mornin'. An' that's what's the matter with me!"

At once his auditors were devoured with eager curiosity.

"An' who mought you be, boss?" cried one, breaking through his proper subordination to Dandy Dave.

"Waal, I'm— You may call me Sam Sutter, ef it's all the same to you, though you're like to suspicion somethin' different before you're many days older. The which I 'low you'll know how to hold yer tongues when you do drop to me."

Nothing could have pleased the crowd better than this sort of a "starter."

Joe Moran was pressed upon from all sides, with assurances of backing "till the last dog was hung."

"Pardner," said Old-man Crocker, gripping his left hand while Dandy Dave held his right, "we don't want nothin' better'n the certificate o' character what you've brung along. Ef you've got enemies, you've got friends what'll stick to ye a heap sight closter. Jest give the word, an' we'll plant ary thing what da'st to show up ag'in ye."

"We're all in purty much the same fix ourselves," added Dandy Dave. "The men as qualifies fur Bloody Run ain't noways squeamish, an' don't you furgit it!"

In two or three days his real name and history began to be whispered about, though no one presumed to call him anything but Sam Sutter.

While his character rested entirely upon his hints, he had been treated much as a guest might be, who, on presenting himself, claims to have been robbed of his credentials. But when the story of Bob Cady's death, and of the lively "doins'" at Coyote and Mulligan's Bend, in which Joe Moran had been so prominent an actor, reached the Run, the sudden increase of cordiality showed this double-dyed murderer and traitor how "solid" his infamous exploits made him in this nest of cut-throats.

Everybody insisted on treating him, and the fawning adulation of the small fry was enough to glut the vanity of a far more susceptible man.

Moran found himself suddenly next in influence to Old-man Crocker, who was not far from dividing the empire with Dandy Dave.

Dave beat him in nothing but "style."

The boys liked the princely "swing" of their leader.

So Moran felt safe from any assault of his enemies in force. What he had to guard against was the knife or the bullet of the skulking assassin.

He had in his possession the secret hoard of himself and his partner, the whole of which he had appropriated after poor Bob's death, and also some money of which he had robbed a coach, with the assistance of the men with whom he had last broken faith, while waiting for an opportunity to secure the precious cryptogram.

With this he was making himself hail-fellow with the men of Bloody Run, the more surely to attach them to himself in case of an emergency, and Beth Crawford's arrival found him playing host at the Bucking Burro.

We have seen that the men of Bloody Run were struck with astonishment on seeing that a lady of Beth's description was about to alight from the coach.

This gave Joe Moran an opportunity to anticipate even Dandy Dave in extending to her the courtesy due her sex.

As he stepped forward to open the coach door, she recognized him at a glance, and was so overcome by a deathly faintness, that it required the exertion of all of her superb will force, to prevent herself from shrinking from him in horror and loathing, and sinking back upon the coach seat.

But with a mighty effort she mastered herself; she smiled in acknowledgment, and even touched the hand he extended to assist her to alight.

The Bucking Burro offered accommodations scarcely suitable for a lady of her undoubted position, and when it became known—as it did very soon, through the amazed stage-driver—that she intended to make the camp a place of residence for an indefinite period, the boys had to put their heads together to devise ways and means for her entertainment.

"Waal, gents," said Johnny o' Jimson's, "making no bones" about the expression of his opinion of the camp, "you've got yourselves in a fix. What do you propose to do about it? Thar ain't nothin' snide about this bale o' dry-goods, an' don't you furgit it! They hain't got her beat in the States, I tell you! Then whar air you goin' to put her, hey?"

"We ain't sp'ilin' fur no chin-music o' yours to see us through," replied Dandy Dave. "You bet yer bottom dollar she'll never drop to this camp, no more'n ef she was in a bon-ton street in 'Frisco."

"She won't, eh?" queried Johnny, with the smile of a man who knew a thing or two himself.

"No, she won't, eh!" retorted Dandy Dave. "Don't you suppose we kin put on the French twist when we want to? Ef thar's a galoot in this hyar camp what don't git right down on his marrow-bones, an' do his level purtiest when she's in sight, I'll mop the ground with him till I wear him up to the shoulder-blades!"

Johnny o' Jimson's laughed at this extravagant threat.

"That's mighty fine talk," he said, "but what do you 'low as I've been doin' on the trip up?"

"What have you been doin'?" demanded Dandy Dave, with a look of sudden apprehension.

"I've been a-givin' of you away—that's what I've been doin'," declared Johnny, boldly.

"The deuce you have!" cried Dave, with a frown that few men cared to provoke.

"Oh, I'm open an' above-board with ye," said the stage-driver, quite unconcerned. "I don't say nothin' behind yer back what I ain't as free to say to yer face. This hyar's the dirtiest hole between the two slopes. Now, ain't that so?"

"Waal, what ef it is? Have you been a-tellin' of the lady that?"

"You bet yer bottom dollar!"

"Waal, I'll swar! Ef you hain't got the cheek—"

"Why, what do you take me fur? Do you 'low as I'd drop the like of her in such a waller as this, all unbeknownst? Not ef the court knows herself! I'm a white man, I am!"

"Waal, you've had your swing. Now, do you know what we're goin' fur to do, on our side?"

"I don't care what you're goin' to do."

"We're goin' to prove you the champion liar o' this age an' country—that's what we're sot fur to do!"

"An' how do you propose fur to do that?"

"We'll run this hyar camp so's when she goes away she'll 'low as it's the garden-spot o' these hyar Rockies—"

"Ef you don't strike out somethin' in that thar line, she'll have jest one sweet time hyar amongst ye."

"Oh, we'll do it! An' then we'll let on to her as thar's a lot o' galoots—the which we've got our suspicions as how they've greased the stage-driver's palm!—what 'lows to kill the place, an' the lies they tell would set an earthquake prophet up in business. How's that?"

"You can't take the heart out o' my body that way, boss," said Johnny o' Jimson's, with a vein of real feeling running through his voice.

"Hoho!" cried Dandy Dave, tauntingly. "I believe the galoot has caved to her call!"

"I'll cave to ary woman what'll 'leave me a show fur 'lowin' as the devil hain't made a ten-strike in this hyar world," declared Johnny o' Jimson's, manfully. "I done my level best fur to prevent her from stoppin' hyar—"

"Hold on, Johnny!" interrupted Dandy Dave. "What did she say to that thar?"

"She 'lowed the men o' the West had the reputation o' knowin' a lady when they seen one, an' she'd resk it in Bloody Run."

"Did she say that?" queried Dandy Dave.

"She did, so—an' a darn sight purtier'n I kin put it."

"Waal, ef we don't fill that requisition, it'll be because we don't know how!"

"I hope you'll stick to that, boss, an' ef you kin do it better by givin' me the lie, I ain't a-squeelin', you bet!"

The dialogue had lost all savor of banter or carelessness. Both men had become seriously in earnest.

Beneath his rough exterior, Johnny o' Jimson's had the sentiments of a gentleman, and the advent of a lady worthy of the name had appealed to the better instincts of Dandy Dave's perverted nature.

Nowhere in the world does true womanhood command reader recognition than among even the roughest of the men who make these mountain mining-camps anything but silvan paradises. Nowhere is the presence of a lady more potent to check the play of wild passions, and constrain at least a decency of outward observance, so that all moral ugliness may be hidden from her eye.

"Boys," said Dandy Dave, "it don't stand to reason as we kin turn this hyar camp into a halleluiah band with a twist o' the wrist, an' keep up to high-water mark for any length o' time. Thar's bound to be sights an' sounds as ain't fitten fur a lady to see an' hyear. I don't expect nothin' superhuman out o' you, though I do propose to hold you to the rack in a way what'll make your hair curl—you hyear me! So the lady can't put up at the Buckin' Burro, nohow."

"What air we to do with her, then? Why, we're to settle her in a shanty, all quiet an' secluded by herself. Thar's your shanty, Jarsey, what's made to our hand. It stands off by itself, at the fur end o' the camp, almost out o' sight an' hearin' of any leetle racket we may have hyar at the Buckin' Burro, ef we don't crack it too loud."

"We'll git Tom to tell her as that's to rent cheap, an' she kin have her meals took to her, all a heap sight more comfortable than ef she stopped at the Buckin' Burro."

"You run an' snake your togs out o' thar quicker'n you ever done ary thing in yer life, an' make the place look as if it was waitin' fur a tenant."

To this unceremonious order to vacate Jarsey offered not the slightest opposition. On the contrary, he considered himself the recipient of quite an honor, as was attested by his hearty: "Don't say a word, boss!"

And away he went, with a hop, skip, and jump.

So that night Beth was domiciled to the satisfaction of every one concerned.

What would the men who were laying themselves out so extensively to hoodwink her have thought, had they known that before she slept she registered anew a vow of vengeance as bloodthirsty as any of their own?

"I'll kill him! But I must entrap him first. I shall defeat the whole of his infamous purpose!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SPREADING THE SNARE.

No lady ever conducted herself more quietly, or with more perfect propriety in every respect, than did Beth Crawford.

It was not that she stood on ceremony with the men of Bloody Run.

On the contrary her manners were charmingly free from formality.

Nothing could be more engaging than the smile she returned to the profoundly respectful bow with which they doffed their hats to her.

Nothing could be franker than the freedom with which she spoke to any of them, when the occasion called for it.

Nothing could be more truly womanly than the serene politeness with which she thanked them and passed on, when they had answered her questions.

There was not a man Jack of them who dreamed of presuming upon her friendliness.

She had the air of expecting the utmost consideration, and taking it for granted that it was necessary to make a stranger of no one, and the most reckless or brutal had not the hardihood to disappoint this confidence.

"Ye hyear me, gents?" cried Dandy Dave, in a moment of exuberant enthusiasm, just after she had passed a crowd as deferential as she would have met in any drawing-room. "I've ranged the States from end to end, an' blow me tight ef thar's her match as stands in shoe-leather betwixt the two oceans!"

To be sure, the "ladies" with whom he had been best acquainted were such as a man of a little different breeding would scarcely have thought of putting in competition with Beth Crawford.

However, the boys thought that Dandy Dave was a very fine gentleman, and that what he didn't know about the fashionable world would make a mighty small book. His unqualified indorsement of Beth was, therefore, taken as a settlement of the matter, quite in accordance with the views of every one present.

Even Old-man Crocker warmed up.

"She's fit to be a queen, an' that's what's the matter with her!" he declared.

How came it that Joe Moran got on with her better than any one else?

The boys were disposed to resent this a little. They felt that she ought to take up with the representative men of the place.

"What's the matter with Dandy Dave?" queried one of their number. "Sam Sutter can't hold a candle to him, nohow—which ain't sayin' but what he's a mighty good man in his way."

"He don't dress with Dave; he can't chin with him; an' he ain't got the style about him," added another.

"Then he's a new-comer," suggested a third. "The camp's jest a-layin' of itself out fur her. She'd orter reciprocate."

"Look a-hyar, Dave," said one of those friends who do more to imbitter a man's life than half a dozen enemies, "ain't you a-lettin' of an outsider take the inside track on ye?"

"What air you chinnin' about?" demanded Dave, with an irritation which showed that he knew well enough what was alluded to.

"Why, this hyar clipper-built—"

"Hold on, Bill," interposed a bystander.

"That's about enough o' that."

"What's the row with you?"

"You want to draw that mild—that's all."

"Mebbe you don't like what I've got to say."

"I don't like your way o' sayin' it; an' what's more, I reckon you'll have to climb over about every man in this camp before you git much further on that tack."

"That's what's the matter!" was the ready confirmation of another.

And by looks, if not in every case by verbal expression, the sentiment received general indorsement.

"Waal," pursued Bill, yielding to this pressure, "I was allowin' as this hyar Sam Sutter—what ye may call—was a-shinin' up to the lady mighty peart fur an outsider, when thar's an ole stan' by what the boys is all backin' every time, an' what's a better man than he ever da'st to be, right under her nose."

This was a sugar-coated pill, but it tasted bitter enough, for all that, to Dandy Dave. What was it to have the "backin'" of the boys, if the lady did not concur in their good opinion?

"Why, blast your hide!" he cried, roughly, "ain't she got the right to pick an' choose to her likin'?"

"Waal, I reckon she has," was the dry response.

And the speaker thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked off with an air which said that he could stand it if Dandy Dave himself was content.

But Dandy Dave had already put the matter to himself in very much the same light. He had a very good opinion of his personal qualities, and that he was the kind of a man that a lady of taste and discernment ought to cotton to. Certainly he could "shine," any day, with Joe Moran.

But he had spoken more wisely than he really knew, when he intimated that the matter had rested entirely with the lady's preference.

By the subtlest shade of difference in her manner, Beth had attracted the one man to her, and held the other—not at arm's length, but at just that delicate poise where, while he had nothing to complain of, there was not the shadow of a ground on which to base a claim to interfere with the better success of another.

Not that Beth had given Joe any marked sign of favor. On the contrary he thought less of his position in her esteem than the others did.

If she stood and talked with him longer than with Dandy Dave or Old-man Crocker, it was probably because the subject up happened to be one on which he could give her more information.

Once he had walked at her side for a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, parting with her at her door, under the eye of not a few who regarded him enviously.

But it had come about in the most accidental way, the furthest possible from a formal tender and acceptance of escort duty.

He had overtaken her approaching the camp, and would have bowed to her and passed on, but that, in her frank way, she had showed him a specimen which she had picked up among the crags, and asked his opinion of it.

The specimen was of no value, being only a mica formation, known as "fool's gold," which deceived not a few in the early days of gold-hunting.

But the condemnation of the specimen led to an explanation, and the explanation to a somewhat general discussion, and as their way was the same, it could not well have been otherwise than that they should continue it in company.

At the door of her shanty she thanked him with the same affability with which she had repaid Bummer Boggs.

This Bummer Boggs was a new man in the camp. Indeed, his arrival had been two or three days later than Beth's own. But, of course, no one was surprised that she did not seem to distinguish him from the rest. She sought information of him just as she addressed any of them—when he happened to be the nearest at hand.

We shall hear more of him presently.

Returning to Joe Moran, Beth had charmed him from the first, yet there was a subtle something about her that held him more in awe of her than it did Dandy Dave.

While contending for the precious cryptogram, Moran had not heard of the arrival of Bob Cady's sweetheart. By deserting the men who helped him gain it, he cut himself off from the chance of learning through them what they soon afterward discovered. And, as he was passing *incognito* in Bloody Run, no one alluded, in his presence, to the matter, which was common report, all taking it for granted that he knew about it.

But no one suspected that the engaging Miss Falmouth, who was stopping at Bloody Run for her health, was this same Beth Crawford, of whose terrible aspect of stony despair nothing was lost by rumor.

Least of all did Joe Moran guess the trap into which he was walking blindly.

The same meddler who had irritated Dandy Dave infused into Joe Moran's veins the one drop of liquid fire which was needed to sweep him over the barrier which his extreme diffidence might have found insurmountable for a much longer time.

"Pardner," observed Bill, with an insinuating drawl, "you're an old broad-horn, ain't you, now?"

"Eh?" asked Moran, not apprehending the allusion.

"Oh, come off! D'ye 'low as we sports peeled onions fur peepers? But, say!—ef you don't care to git Dandy Dave in your wool, take a fool's advice an' drop it."

"What air you a-givin' of us, anyway?" demanded Moran, turning full upon the enigmatical William.

"I'm 'lowin' as Dandy Dave knows the p'int of a likely heifer as well as any other man, an' ef he hain't called you so fur, it's because he reckons he ain't got nary dirty leetle pair in his hand. But he may have it in him to bluff yit, ef it's his only show. Eh! how's that? It costs ye nothin'. Maybe it ain't worth nothin'. Ta-ta! Call ag'in!"

And bowing in mock suavity of leave-taking, Bill walked away, leaving Joe Moran to stare after him with an entirely new train of thoughts chasing one another pell-mell through his brain.

Was it possible that his relations with Miss Falmouth were a theme of camp gossip? Had it gone so far that Dandy Dave was actually jealous, and that the others believed that he was a favored man?

"And why not?" he demanded of himself, with a wild bound of the heart, while a stream of liquid fire seemed to thread his veins to his utmost extremities, filling him with a fine tingling sensation, as if he had struck a nerve.

"Dandy Dave!" he repeated, his nostrils dilating, and his eyes glowing with intense scorn.

He had no difficulty in seeing that Dandy Dave was not the man to mate with such a woman as Beth Crawford. His own unfitness quite escaped him.

But then, if the lady really looked upon him with favor, was not her election decisive of that point?

As for Dandy Dave's "kicking," Joe Moran was not to be bluffed out of any advantage that was his.

From that moment he began to think of Beth Crawford as a possible possession.

"An' ef this hyar pans out the bonanza Bob 'lowed it was," he mused, passing his hand over the cryptogram which he carried securely hidden in his clothes, "what's the reason I couldn't cut this hyar country, an' be somebody along o' the nobs an' nabobs? But money won't do it all. A man's got to sport an establishment. Then whar'd I git anybody to hold over Miss Falmouth, hyar? With an A1 rag-out, she'd be a swell along o' the best of 'em."

He recalled instances, known to everybody, of men who, starting with scarcely his personal advantages, had acquired sudden wealth, married women of refinement, and taken place in the ranks of the most ostentatious, if not the best society, to "hobnob with nabobs," as he put it, and at any rate to be surfeited with newspaper adulation.

And now the precious cryptogram, to gain which he had perpetrated the most infamous act known to the Western code of morals, acquired a new value in his eyes.

Thus far, the utmost stretch of his ambition had been to become a leader among sporting men, and run a camp, as Dandy Dave was doing. But what was this compared with gaining admittance to the charmed circle of the money-kings of New York and the nobility of the Old World?

It was not difficult to make the opportunity for another walk with Miss Falmouth, which should appear to be quite accidental, as the previous one had really been.

At almost any time in the day she might be found wandering about somewhere among the crags in the vicinity of the camp, picking up curious specimens of rock, or flowers, or moss, or anything that happened to strike her fancy.

or standing on a bowlder or fallen tree-trunk, enjoying the prospect.

It was not long before Joe Moran overtook her again on her way home, but pausing at the roadside to dislodge bits of rock with the point of her sun-shade, and watch them bound down the declivity, filling the canyon with a re-echoing clatter.

She turned and bowed to him as he approached, but resumed her amusement without speaking, further than the conventional:

"Good-afternoon, sir!"

Moran had not the courage to stop uninvited, so nothing came of this meeting on which he had built a wonderful structure of future possibilities.

As is common with the magic castles of a lover's fancy, everything tumbled in ruins at a touch.

"We're a pack o' fools!" he said to himself, bitterly. "What does she care fur the like o' me? Let ole Bummer Boggs serve her turn, an' she don't want nothin' better."

But the next time she spoke to him he was filled with wild elation. She was so gracious, almost confidential, and she hung upon his answer as if it would leave nothing further to be said.

But need we follow her efforts to snare him in the spell of her witcheries? She toyed with him as an angler plays a fish that could snap his rod in a twinkling, if held in an unskillful hand. This woman, who was the soul of sincerity and simplicity, had suddenly developed all the subtleties of a practiced coquette.

She knew when he began to spend whole days skulking about to watch her, himself, as he fondly imagined, unseen.

She did not deceive him by the slightest sign of consciousness of his vicinity, and, when he managed to overtake her, she would greet him with just a shade of reserve in her wonted frankness, and let him pass on.

How did she manage to convey to him the idea that this was only the tactics of feminine prudence, which she thought it worth while to practice toward him alone?

The thought set him on fire, and, when she saw it in his eyes, she knew that he was ripe for the springing of her trap.

That night, when the door of her shanty had closed between her and the observation of the curious world, she cast herself upon her bunk, clutching the blankets as if she would rend them with her nails, and even closing her teeth upon the ticking of her moss pillow, while with laboring breath she cried:

"Ah, this will kill me! How I hate him! How I loathe him! It is unendurable! But no! I would tear the soul out of my body before I would abandon my revenge! I'll lead him through a hell of torture, and then I'll kill him, when I have won from him the prize for which he steeped his soul in my lover's blood!"

"Rob! Rob! Oh, my murdered darling!"

But on the morrow her heart was a thing of stone!

CHAPTER IX.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

On the following day Beth took her way out of the camp as was her wont, with so care-free an air that no one would have suspected her of any design more sinister than a foray into the realm of Nature, to rifle some of her secret beauties.

On her way through the camp she came upon old Bummer Boggs, who was making his way toward the Bucking Burro, having passed the night no one knew where, but probably under some shelving rock, or in some dry cavern, where he had, by an unusual stroke of industry, managed to collect a shake-down of mountain-moss.

He depended upon wheedling his morning dram out of the good-nature of Dandy Dave, or some other who happened to be "swelling" on the proceeds of a streak of luck the night before.

When any of the boys was flush, he liked to play the host, and as the large-handed, princely way in which he "blew in the gilders" was the measure of his quality as a gentleman and a good fellow, and the bummer knew how to play upon the vein of vanity thus cultivated, he fared much better than one would have supposed, for a chronic "dead-beat."

It is proverbial that it is easier to get liquor than meat, and the boys who were readiest to "set 'em up fur the ole man" would have been the first to "kick" and vote him a bore, if they had been taxed for his sustenance as well as for his drink.

But he managed so that nobody ever thought of him in connection with eating.

The fact was, that he knew his way to the kitchen of the Bucking Burro as well as to the bar, and with his wily tongue he, to a certain extent, got "on the blind side" of the cook. Once in a while, when it began to look as if he was "crowding the mourners," he managed to find a few grains of gold dust somewhere about his clothes, with which to pay his reckoning.

But at all times he requited favors more freely with the coin of gentle speech than with that

which bore, or might be made to bear, the imprint of the soaring eagle.

This morning Beth stopped him, with an address which the little knot lounging about the door of the Bucking Burro could not hear.

When she passed them, every man Jack had stood hat in hand until she was by, and now Bummer Boggs was showing her the same deference.

What she said to him was:

"I am now ready for action."

"An' you better believe I'm about ready fur a change. This bummin' around, with nothin' to do but to sleep an' lie, looks mighty easy from the outside, an' it may agree with some constitutions better'n it does with mine. Ef it don't, thar's some mighty hard-workin' men as gits abused fur laziness."

And, lo! the speaker had the voice of Migglesie.

His disguise was indeed most complete.

"I am glad to see that you are so keen for something to do," pursued Beth. "I hope you will display an equal intelligence in carrying out my wishes."

"Rest easy, mum," was Migglesie's positive assurance. "Ef you don't over-size my pile, I'll ante an' pass the buck, an' ef you do, I'll cave an' no growlin'."

"Have you the nerve to risk being shot?" asked Beth, with the cool indifference of a Lucretia Borgia.

The fact was, that her lust for revenge was so absorbing, and her contempt for this man so great, that the thought of the possible sacrifice of him to her purpose did not rouse her blunted sensibilities.

But Migglesie was not at all lacking in a due sense of the importance of his life—to himself! While he lent himself to Beth's revenge, he did not lose sight of his own, nor of the prospect of being on hand at the division of the spoils.

So he replied, with all humility, yet with due firmness:

"I reckon I've got the grit, mum, to face the music what ary galoot you'll scare up in a day's range is spilin' to jig to, but thar's one privilege what ye must leave open to my hand."

"What privilege?"

"At the third an' last call, when I see myself goin'! goin'! you must leave me free to put in a bid, ef I kin, before the hammer falls at gone! That's human natur' an' hoss sense."

It was a very reasonable request, in all conscience, yet for an instant Beth looked at her petitioner much as the great Frederick must have scanned his soldiers, when he demanded:

"What! Would you live forever?"

However, she let the decision of the matter go by default, saying to him coldly:

"Be at the rendezvous at three o'clock, and I will give you full instructions."

During this dialogue Beth had made a waving motion with the point of her parasol in the direction of a certain cliff, as if indicating a possible line of ascent, and Bummer Boggs had seemed to reply, if not to much purpose, certainly with great volubility and commendable anxiety to oblige.

They now parted, Beth going on her way, swinging her sun-shade with the girlish grace that distinguished her, while Bummer Boggs stood staring after her with the admiration that all men accorded, and bowing repeatedly with the obsequiousness of a drunken old humbug.

Not until she was out of sight did he turn and make his way to the Bucking Burro, with a well-satisfied grin on his dirty phiz.

"You blasted ole stoughton-bottle!" was Dandy Dave's not ill-natured greeting, "you feel mighty good, don't you?"

"Oh, waal, boys, you hyear me!" was Bummer Boggs's reply, "I ain't so young as I used to be, but in my time I was a screamer with the ladies."

Everybody laughed at his absurd pretensions, and somebody asked:

"What did she want o' the like o' you, anyway?"

Bummer Boggs rewarded the questioner with a knowing wink.

"A gentleman," he answered, "never betrays these hyar leetle confidences."

Dandy Dave denounced his impudence roundly, with the contrast between expression and real feeling which is usual in reproving a privileged character.

Among the loungers stood Joe Moran, not joining in the banter that was tossed about from side to side, but uneasily observant.

Of course he was not jealous of the old bummer, but he was curious to know what Beth had said to him, and where she was going.

"What's the reason you young laddiebucks leave her to go ramblin' around all alone by herself?" asked Boggs, looking from Dave to Joe.

"In my day, we done better'n that. But then, to be sure, the fellers don't pan out nowadays as they use to did."

"Why, gents, when I was on the sparkin'-list, the calf o' my leg measured nineteen inches straight, an' I could jig the shoes off'n ary thing in the county. Maybe we didn't whoop'er up in them ole days! Oh, no! But the girls didn't have to go a-beggin' of somebody to see 'em home from a shin-dig, an' when they went

abroad to take the air Sunday afternoons, you bet thar was a strappin' gossoon along fur to help 'em pass the time."

"But them ole days has gone up the flume!" added Boggs, with a prodigious sigh, and a regretful shake of the head.

"It makes a man's mouth water fur to think of 'em," was his meditative conclusion, "but it's dry work a-chinnin' about 'em to a lot o' galoots what looks on with their mouths open an' their han's in their breeches pockets, while a ginocine, A 1 high-stepper—"

But the old fellow fell to coughing, as if his throat were too parched to proceed.

"Maybe we ain't so fur behind them times as we have the look o' bein'," observed Old-man Crocker, dryly—"eh, Sutter?"

This was aimed at Dandy Dave, at whom the speaker cast a sidelong glance, to see the affect of his shot.

But Dave was equal to the occasion. Secretly annoyed, he contracted his eyes with a knowing look, blew a curl of tobacco smoke from his pursed lips, and watched its ascent with a well-satisfied air.

Joe Moran too shot a covert glance at his supposed rival, and the contented serenity of the boss of the town stung him to the quick.

Instantly his soul was swathed in a flame of jealousy.

Was it possible that "yon galoot," as his jealous rage styled Dandy Dave, could be stealing a march on him?

It did not occur to him that he was so watchful of Miss Falmouth, that it would have been quite impossible for any one to have very extended interviews with her undiscovered by him.

He only thought that, with the lady favorable, it would be an easy thing for a subtle rival to elude his vigilance.

He instantly resolved to push his claims to Miss Falmouth's notice, but masked his purpose behind an indifferent answer to Old-man Crocker.

"It's by me," he said. "Make it to suit yerself. Meanwhile, suppose we act on the ole man's hint. It is gittin' to be a long while between drinks. Step up, gents, an' crook yer elbows."

"Me noble senor!" was Bummer Boggs's tribute in return for this timely invitation, "the gents o' these hyar times—some on 'em—kin double discount the gents of ary other time, when it comes to settin' 'em up with a royal hand. Ef Tom Duffy had the stuff what 'ud shine along o' the whisky we use to swig in ole County Claire, 'stid o' this hyar ackifortis an' bilge-water, we'd all be lords an' ladies from sun-down till sun-up in the mornin'!"

As the crowd filed into the saloon, Old-man Crocker sent a final shaft at Dandy Dave.

"We ain't a-lettin' on," he observed, with an insinuating smile.

So it happened that Bummer Boggs got his whisky, and Joe Moran, alias Sam Sutter, got "a bee in his bonnet."

The former kept his appointment with Beth, and received detailed instructions as to the part he was to play, which will be developed as our story progresses.

The latter put in a day of feverish anxiety, and finished by walking blindly into the trap set for him.

From previous experience Beth knew about the course he would pursue—where he would let her pass him, and where he planned to overtake her.

She had stationed Migglesie, and all was in readiness.

At the last moment, as if to prove the correctness of her plans, she heard the dislodgment of a stone by his foot as he followed after her.

Just as he was "screwing up his courage," and going over for the hundredth time what he was to say to her, and how he was to act if she failed as heretofore to open the way to an interview, he heard her voice raised to a key of sternness, saying:

"No, sir! Stand out of my way and let me pass!"

Upon this followed the rumble of a base voice, the articulations of which were not distinguishable.

Then came a piercing scream, and the cry:

"Help! help!"

With a shout of encouragement to the girl, and of warning to her insulter, whoever he might be—and Moran thought only of Dandy Dave—the lover snatched out his revolver, and bounded down the path to the rescue.

He met Beth fleeing toward him, so precipitately that she rushed fairly into his arms.

"Oh, Mr. Sutter," she cried, clinging to him, and panting breathlessly, "I am so glad to see you!"

CHAPTER X.

FOOL'S PARADISE.

WHILE detained by Beth Crawford's clinging hands, Moran heard the rattle of stones dislodged by some one fleeing down the mountain road.

It was unmistakably the heavy tread of a man, but what man he was unable to say, since the road at this point was so crooked, and the

undergrowth so dense, that he had not caught the slightest glimpse of him.

"Let me go!" he cried, striving to pass her.

"I'll fix the villain so that he'll never—"

"Oh, no! no!" she insisted, detaining him resolutely. "I will have no violence. It is really of no consequence."

"Of no consequence that you have been insulted? I'll kill him for—"

"Listen! You do not understand. It was only that he thought to frighten me into giving him a little money—"

"Money? He allowed to rob you?"

"Oh, the merest trifle. You could hardly call it robbery."

"Money!" repeated Moran, in astonishment. "It wasn't Dandy Dave, then?"

"Mr. Blair?" exclaimed Beth, with well-simulated surprise, though she knew well enough what had prompted Moran to that suspicion. "I should say not! How absurd! What put that idea into your head?"

"Waal, whoever he was— Who was it?" stammered Moran, in embarrassment.

"It is of no consequence," repeated Beth.

"Let the matter drop. The man had been drinking, and meant no real harm. Of course, I was a little frightened at first, but it is all over now, and there is no use in causing further trouble."

"An' do you mean to say that you'll pass by a matter o' this kind?" cried Moran, in indignant surprise.

"Oh, certainly, Mr. Sutter," replied Beth, laughing, as if to show that she attached no further importance to it. "I know how violent you gentlemen are, intending to be chivalrous, to be sure. And I appreciate your kindness in aiming to protect me. But I am sure that, vying with one another, you would, among you, punish the poor fellow far more than the offense deserves."

"I haven't the least fear that it will be repeated, so I will not tell you who it was, and I rely upon you not to mention to the others that anything of the kind has occurred."

Still she stood quite close to Moran, speaking rapidly, and laughing a little hysterically. She was far from having the air of one perfectly at ease, but rather of one who was making a brave effort to calm a very decided state of nervousness.

These contradictions bewildered Joe Moran, and the suspicions natural to his coarse nature were quick to return.

What if she were deceiving him, and it was Dandy Dave, after all?

But was it like Dave to run away? Being in for it, would he not rather have prepared to give the rescuer a hot reception?

If, piqued at the rejection of some advance, he had offered the lady an affront, he could not know that she would shield him by silence, and, boss of the town though he might be, if such a story went to the boys, he would be run out of the camp in short order.

A reason why, having repulsed him, Beth should yet refrain from denouncing him, was not far to seek.

She shrunk from being the occasion of bloodshed.

That the matter was not so trifling as Beth would have him believe, was still further apparent, from the fact that her actions did not confirm her professed freedom from apprehension.

It is not uncommon for people to become more nervous after a peril has passed, and with it the necessity for self-control, and Beth now gave evidence of such a reaction.

She wrung her hands and went through the motion of tossing her hair back off her temples, and betrayed other signs of disturbance, as she went on speaking rapidly and somewhat disconnectedly.

"It was very fortunate that you were just at hand, Mr. Sutter. I don't know what I should have done without you. If you will kindly see me as far as my door, I shall be greatly obliged. But, there! I'm making you anxious again, ain't I? Suppose we say no more about it."

"And I had been having such a delightful time ever since I came to the camp!"

The last was said with a regretful cadence, as if, in spite of herself, she betrayed the feeling that her old sense of security was now gone.

"You'll excuse me, Miss Falmouth," said Moran, earnestly, "ef I'm free to say that I don't jest like this hyar. Of course, what you say is law an' gospel, but I'm in fur treatin' yon ga—"

Joe stumbled over the word "galoot." It did not seem just the word to use to a lady, but on the spur of the moment he could think of no other, so he concluded lamely:

"He'd orter have a coat o' tar an' feathers, at the least calculation."

"But you will promise me not to pursue the matter any further, and to say nothing to any one?"

"I sha'n't feel easy about your goin' around alone. I'll have to keep on the lookout that no harm don't come to ye."

"Oh, no indeed! I can't ask you, or even allow you, to put yourself to any such trouble on my account," cried Miss Falmouth, with charming confusion.

She did not blush, but in everything else her acting was perfect.

Joe Moran's heart gave a great bound. From the look she shot into his eyes, he felt that he had made more progress toward a different footing by that little speech than by all else.

He lost no time in striking again while the iron was hot, and seeking to deepen the impression by a corresponding avowal as to the past.

"This hyar ain't the most fitten place in the world fur a lady," he pursued, "an', ef you will overlook the liberty, I've made bold to keep an eye on you ever since you come to the camp, an' took to wanderin' around by yerself."

Then, in a thoroughly young-lady-like way, she ejaculated:

"Oh, Mr. Sutter!"

And it was apparent to Joe that there was no serious displeasure in her deprecation of the liberty he had taken.

"The boys is all right fur the most part," he pursued, "an' they'd fight fur ye at the drop o' the hat, but thar ain't no tellin' when one o' 'em may git the dev— Beggin' yer pardon! But when they're drunk, they're oncertain."

"Oh, but you don't know how well able I am to take care of myself," insisted the lady.

"Do you go armed?" asked Joe.

"Armed! Oh, mercy, no! What should I do with a revolver? Just think—I never fired a pistol in my life."

"You shouldn't orter go unarmed in this country, man or woman. If you could shoot, you'd be as safe as anybody."

"But I think I should be more afraid of the weapon—especially in my own hands—than of any man I ever saw," laughed Beth.

"You could easy larn to use 'em. I wish you'd let me larn ye," ventured Joe, inwardly quailing at his temerity.

"Oh, would you?—could you, without too much trouble?" cried Miss Falmouth, with such a burst of sunny delight that she fairly took his breath away.

"I'd give all my old boots an' shoes fur the chance," declared Joe, with a promptitude and warmth that warned Beth that he would make no backward lover when the ice of deference was once fairly broken.

"Let me try now," she petitioned, looking toward the weapons he carried strapped upon either hip.

"This is a mite heavy fur a lady," he said, drawing one of the revolvers from its holster. "You kin git 'em any size ye like."

"Oh, I'm stronger than you think," was Beth's assurance, as she reached out for the weapon.

He gave it to her, and with a little cry of surprise and dismay, she threw forward the other hand and caught it, as it sagged down in her grasp much as if he had passed to her a bag of shot.

"It is heavy, isn't it?" she admitted, with a pleased laugh. "But, see!—I can hold it this way, with both hands."

"That won't do," objected Moran. "A man don't want a revolver often, but when he does, he wants it mighty bad, an' then everythin' depends on his handlin' it as if it grew to him. You don't have no time to think, or to git ready. Ef you can't cut loose a shot as easy an' as quick as you'd throw up yer hand to ward off a blow, it ain't no good. The other feller's got ye, an' you've passed out."

"But I could never learn to handle a great clumsy thing like this in that way."

In spite of her protest, she gripped the weapon firmly in one hand, and raised it to a level at arm's-length.

Moran was surprised at the steadiness with which she sustained it. She was much stronger than he had supposed.

"You might not with this," he replied, "though you do pan out better'n ary woman I ever see before. But with one more to yer hand, you'd be surprised at how it would git thar when ye once got the slight."

Beth recovered the weapon and held it again in both hands, while, with a woman's lax interest in abstract "moralizing," and impatience to come to the point at once, she asked:

"But how do you fire it? I pulled this little thing under here as hard as I could, but it didn't go off."

"You'd better know a mite about it before you lead off," suggested Joe, with an indulgent smile.

Drawing his other revolver, he proceeded to explain to her the various parts and their uses.

"Hyar air the cartridges in this hyar cylinder. You see it turns the space o' one chamber every time the hammer raises an' falls."

"Yes," interposed Beth, vivaciously, having watched the process thus far about as attentively as a young lady usually does, "but where's the ram-rod? How do you load it? And I don't see any caps. I thought a pistol had to have caps, just like a shot-gun?"

Moran explained to her the improvements in modern firearms, which included even shot-guns, but long before he had stated the case to his satisfaction, she interposed with:

"I guess I'll let you do the loading, so we won't bother about that. But, as you say, the main thing is to know how to 'cut it loose.' I'm

afraid I don't like your new-fangled notions. Give me a good old-fashioned shot-gun! Somebody holds it up for you, or you lay it across the top of the garden-wall, and then all you've got to do is to get your finger fixed all right on this little thing here, then shut your eyes and give a quick pull and, *bang!* before you have a chance to scream, it's all over with."

"But you have to cock even a shot-gun before you kin fire it off," urged Moran, proceeding to explain the relations of hammer and trigger.

"Oh, is that so?" asked Beth, with a charming ignorance. "Well, I never did that part. I had all I could attend to cutting it loose."

And looking into his eyes, she laughed brightly.

Joe Moran had never been the object of such coquetry as this. The women he had flirted with had tossed their heads in affected pique, or boxed his ears, or given him a sharp retort; but sprightly wit without rudeness was something quite new in his experience.

He flushed under the girl's dancing eye, and could find no suitable reply.

She left him no time to rummage about for lost wits. As he had said about pistol-firing, the thing must be done at once, or the occasion would be past.

"Which eye do you shut?" was her next demand, as, seeming not to notice his embarrassment, she threw up her weapon, closing first one eye and then the other.

"Neither," replied Moran, "unless you're a fashion-plate sharp in a shootin'-gallery. You don't sight over a pistol only at a long range, or when you've got the hull day before ye, which the same ye don't often have in this country. When a man calls you fur all you're worth, you don't stop fur no pretty business."

"But you *have* to take aim!" cried Beth, arching her eyebrows as if any other supposition were quite too unreasonable to be for a moment entertained.

"Do you?" retorted Moran. "Waal, I'll show you a trick worth two of that. Hold that shootin'-iron in yer left hand, ef you please. Now, then, do you see that pine cone, layin' in a leetle holler in that rock yonder?"

"Yes."

"Waal, point at it with the finger of yer right hand, so."

"That's a good way to show somebody else what to shoot at," observed Beth, laughingly, "but it strikes me as a queer way to begin to do the shooting yourself."

Nevertheless she complied, throwing up her hand carelessly, and pointing a slender, tapering finger at the mark indicated.

"We'll see about that before we git through," returned Moran.

"Now keep yer hand perfectly still, shut yer left eye, and cant yer head over to the right—like this—until ye kin look straight along the top o' yer finger."

"Meanwhile, if that were a man over there, on man-slaughter—or, rather, woman-slaughter—intent, wouldn't he be blowing the top of my head off while I was amusing myself pointing my finger at him?" laughed Beth, while doing as she was bid.

"You're doin' yer pointin' now," returned Moran, "so when the man's to the fore, yer shootin'-iron will point itself."

"Howsomever, ye see that you're pointin' straight at the cone."

"Why, certainly!" cried Beth. "Don't you suppose I can point at anything when I want to?"

"But you didn't stop to sight over yer finger."

"Of course not. This is not the first time I have ever pointed at anything."

"Try yer left hand, an' see how that pans out."

Beth did as he bade her.

"You see that ain't quite such a dead-sure thing," remarked Moran.

"That's because I'm not left-handed," was Beth's explanation.

"Exactly," admitted her companion. "An' that's what's the matter with everybody when they first begin to shoot a pistol. It's like usin' yer left hand. You don't know how. Now, you've got to handle a pistol till it's like the finger o' yer right hand. You look at what ye want to hit, with both eyes, an' ef it's a man what knows how to handle himself, you keep them eyes mighty wide open, too! Then you point at him, an' blaze away."

"Well," said Beth, slowly, as she began to appreciate the force of Moran's argument, "there seems to be more in that than I was looking for."

"Thar's millions in it!" observed Moran, sentimentally.

Then he proceeded to illustrate his method.

"See hyar," he said. "Suppose that was the heart o' that thar scoundrel what you won't let me git a crack at. One! two! three!"

And as he spoke, he threw up his hand and fired all in one motion.

Starting at the unexpectedness of the shot, Beth recovered herself barely in time to see a few flying fragments, as the cone vanished, almost as if by magic.

If Moran was showing off his skill, the effort was a marked success.

The girl turned somewhat pale, as she looked up at him.

This was the man she had undertaken to cope with! She had not believed that such deadly accuracy and such instantaneous action were possible.

"Suppose he detects me!" she reflected. "An instant will suffice him to frustrate all. The same deadly aim that separated us will unite us again!"

"But he shall not detect me," she went on, "with that weapon in his reach! I will never go to Robert with the message of failure! His murderer live, with no one to hunt him down? Never! never! never!"

These thoughts flashed through her mind like a glare of lightning, and the expression appropriate to them swept across her face like a mask of Medusa.

But the vigilance over every look and gesture to which she had schooled herself since entering upon this difficult mission, did not fail her now.

She knew every changing expression of her face, every flash of her eye, by a carefully-cultivated muscular sense, so that, even before the look of wondering surprise had time to appear on Joe Moran's countenance, she knew what he had caught a glimpse of, too fleeting for him to quite realize what he had really seen.

Instantly she dropped her eyes, and lifted her hand to her heart.

"Let me go home!" she petitioned.

Her voice was so hoarse, her pallor so extreme, the collapse of her figure, but now buoyant with sparkling life, so marked, that, believing her about to faint from some sudden disturbance of the heart, Moran seized her by the arm.

She shuddered at his touch, but by a mighty effort prevented herself from shrinking from it.

"It is nothing," she assured him. "I am subject to these attacks. It will pass in a moment. There!—thank you—I am better already."

She recovered herself almost as abruptly as she had succumbed to he knew not what weakness. But as she passed her hand across her face, he noticed that a slight moisture had started about her yet bloodless and tremulous lips, and she looked exhausted.

"I have frightened you!" he ejaculated, remorsefully, as he received back from her the revolver which she held out to him wearily.

"The shot was a little unexpected," she admitted, "and, you know, I came here for my health."

This was equivocation, but the girl who was ordinarily the soul of honor and truthfulness, had subordinated everything to her fixed purpose of revenge. Her conscience was asleep, if not dead. Only her hatred lived.

To efface the impression just made upon Joe Moran's mind, and to lull to sleep any stirring suspicion of the truth, she affected a gayety which a finer perception than his might have seen, was forced and hysterical.

But he was listening to the siren's song, the poison was in his blood, and he only knew that she was coquettishly confidential, as she chatted about her prospective lessons in pistol-shooting.

So they returned to the camp, and at the door of her shanty she gave him her hand, and thanked him with a smile that set his pulses to leaping.

She did not seem to care that the boys were witness to this mark of intimacy.

In his mad elation Joe Moran could not join them and meet their covert looks, if not bantering words. He went straight to his own shanty.

As he entered, a piece of brown paper, such as is used to wrap hardware in, attracted his attention to where it lay on the floor.

With a nervous start he sprang forward and picked it up, mechanically putting his hand to the spot where the precious cryptogram was sewed under the lining of his coat.

Could he have dropped a piece of it? For this scrap of paper was of the kind on which it was written.

Hastily opening it, he read with staring eyes: "Beware of Bob Cady!"

The specter of retribution had risen in his path at the very moment when everything seemed most promising.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TEASER "DROPS IN."

"WHOO! I'm a teaser!"

The patrons of the Bucking Burro were lounging about in most forlorn listlessness, waiting, yet scarcely hoping, for something to "turn up."

It was in the middle of the afternoon, when the most wide-awake mining-camp ought to have a rather sleepy look, the men who "make Rome howl" at night being then engaged digging the gold which furnishes them with their nightly carouse.

But it was suspected that the citizens of Bloody Run did their mining for the most part on the road, with a revolver for a pick, and a stage-coach for a rocker. Certainly honest work

was a quite secondary consideration with them, "crooking their elbow" being the most arduous of their labors all day long.

Consequently the place was noted for "keeping the ball rolling" about twenty hours out of the twenty-four.

But now Dandy Dave, who was lounging against the bar, drawing radiating lines from a splash of whisky that had been spilled by his own languid hand, yawned dismally, and drawled:

"You hyear me, fellers! We've struck a streak o' blue Sundays in this hyar camp. What's got into the thing? 'Pears like it was time to move on, an' open up in a fresh spot, some'rs."

"We want a mite o' blood-lettin'." That's what's the matter with us," observed Old-man Crocker, tearing the end of a plug of tobacco with his yellow teeth, as a dog shreds gristly meat from a bone held between his paws.

"S'pose you lead off?" replied Dandy Dave, merely for the sake of talk.

"I ain't a hog," asserted Mr. Crocker, elegantly. "I'll stand back an' give somebody else a show."

And his auditors knew that this was a modest allusion to a "g'ison diffikilty" out of which he had come only the day before Beth Crawford's arrival, with a new notch on the heft of his bowie, a grim record corresponding to a mound of red clay up in the "High Lot" of the camp.

"I lowed ye might want to keep yer hand in," said Dave, not looking up from the intricate pattern he was tracing.

"It's your put," answered Old-man Crocker. "We hain't hyeared from you lately."

All this was mere "chin-music." Even those who turned the crank wearied of it, and let the matter drop.

None of the others vouchsafed so much as a word of comment. It wasn't "business."

At this moment, then, the door of the saloon was suddenly, without warning, thrown violently open, and the figure of a man shot through it as if propelled by a catapult, landing in the middle of the room at a single bound.

"Whoop!" he yelled. "I'm a teaser!"

Everybody present had witnessed challenges of this sort before, and they usually promised the liveliest kind of a time.

Still there was no manifestation of awakened interest. No one's face lighted up with expectancy. No one changed his bored attitude, more than to turn his eyes slowly toward the stranger.

It would not do for the credit of the camp, to have it appear that any fellow who chose to jump into the crowd and demand elbow-room could create a sensation.

The man who had chosen this characteristic method of introducing himself to the camp stood in a crouching posture, with his hands on his knees, his shoulders drawn up, his back arched, his head thrust forward, looking about in fantastic mimicry of a buffalo bull, when, his fore-feet planted firmly, his head lowered, and his eyes rolling he challenges a bovine rival to the test of battle.

"Don't all speak to once, gents," he requested with a grin.

And he got his wish, for no one deigned a word.

But this was evidently not what he had come for, so, suddenly snatching his hat from his head and throwing it on the floor between himself and those standing about the bar, he pursued, with an exaggerated air of pleading:

"Spit on it, somebody—do!"

He got this request too, with a vengeance.

Not a man within reach denied his petition, and the gage of battle was fairly deluged with streams of tobacco-juice from all sides.

"Waal, I swar!" cried the owner of the hat, with a grin of delight. "That thar's a leetle like ole times. The boys hain't furgot their slight, an' that's a fact. Nary miss in the hull gang. That thar was beautiful—beautiful!"

But Dandy Dave went further than his companions.

With a deft kick, he sent the hat flying straight for the face of its owner, but that the latter caught it as skillfully.

"Thankee, sir!—thankee!" said the stranger, slapping the unshapely piece of felt across his thigh, to relieve it of the worst of its unwholesome drenching. "I alluz likes to strike a camp whar the gents picks up anythin' what's throwed down. Thankee, gents, one an' all. You're the kind o' fellers I likes to tie to. I reckon I'll set down in this hyar camp, an' go my pile on her."

And to the surprise of every one present, he put on his hat, and stood bowing and grinning to right and left, as if he had been received with distinguished favor.

"Waal, I swar!" ejaculated Dandy Dave, with undisguised contempt, "ef you ain't the way-downest white man I ever sot my two peepers on! I'm glad I kicked your hat before dirtyin' my feet on the likes of you."

The stranger looked at Dave with a smile of admiration.

"You've dropped mighty quick," he said. "That's what I likes to see. Wherever I sojourn, the boys all allows as it's money in a

man's pocket not to kick ag'in' the Teaser. But ginerally two or three o' the reggulation crawfishes o' the place has to whale Cain out o' me before they crowns me chief."

"Whale you!" cried Dave in disgust. "Why, you ole stoughton-bottle, we hain't got a man in the camp what 'u'd demean himself to kick the like of you into the nearest wallow?"

"You don't say?" cried the stranger, elevating his eyebrows and puckering up his mouth in apparent surprise. "Waal," he continued, shaking his head regretfully, "that gits me! I did want to show you galoots down hyar, the new style o' layin' out subjecks fur the undertaker. I lowed as ye might have a chap what 'u'd be middlin' easy fur to git away with, what you'd jest as lieve I'd operate on. But that thar's jest my luck!"

"Hi, Chippy!" called Old-man Crocker.

"On deck, boss!" responded a little man, starting to his feet as abruptly as if a spring had suddenly been tripped under him.

"Mount him!" was the laconic order.

"With the greatest pleasure in life," answered Chippy, tripping forward with a parade of jauntiness.

He was a smirking little rascal, who played jackal to the more redoubtable Crocker.

In return he got the protection of the man of whom everybody but Dandy Dave stood in fear, and was thus enabled to play the bully over men who would otherwise have "sat down" on his pretensions in short order.

With an insolent grin on his face he advanced, rocking his head from side to side, and throwing out his elbows, in exaggerated pugilistic attitudes.

"Hold on, gents!—fur the love o' God hold on!" cried the stranger, waving Chippy off, as he retreated toward the door through which he had entered in such warlike style.

"Look at the blatherskite!" scoffed one of the bystanders.

"Stand to the rack, man," admonished another, "an' take yer gruel with a short-handled spoon. It'll do you a power o' good."

"But, gents, hyear me!" pleaded the stranger. "I don't want none o' yer crack fightin' men, ye onderstand. I ain't ekil to it. I seen my best days when I was a heap younger than I be now."

"Cheese it, you duffer! What do ye want littler'n Chippy?"

"He's little, but he looks powerful loud! Gimme somethin'—"

"Drop him, Chippy!"

It seemed the easiest thing in the world. The stranger was backing off, apparently only hoping to protect his face as much as possible while he underwent the process of being "dropped."

In his abject fear he seemed to have become bewildered, and lost the direction of the door through which he hoped to make his escape, and backed into a corner.

At what looked like a favorable moment, Chippy jumped for him.

But the blow by which he expected to knock his man out at a single effort, somehow failed to make connections.

His wrist was clutched desperately, and the impetus of his rush carried him fairly into his cowardly antagonist's embrace.

Then there was a mingling of arms and legs, as instantaneous as it was intricate, so that no one made out just how it happened, but the two went to the floor with a crash, Chippy undermost!

The stranger scrambled to his feet as quickly as possible, and stood in seeming terror and bewilderment, looking at the crowd and at his fallen assailant, as if he were as much puzzled as the rest to account for such a termination of the affair.

I say termination, for Chippy had received a bump of the head that left him staring straight up at the ceiling, with his wits plainly wool-gathering.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Dandy Dave, who, entertaining a secret jealousy of Old-man Crocker, yet unwilling to provoke an encounter with him, was ready to "get in on him" through his jackal. "He's knocked your man out."

"He's got a point on him," admitted Crocker, "but that was a foul. Hi, thar, Chippy! Time! time!"

But Chippy did not jump at his master's word, as was his wont.

"He's out fur keeps, I tell you," insisted Dave.

"Gents, 'pon me soul I didn't go fur to do it!" pleaded the stranger. "I hope you will excuse me."

"Why, you sneakin' whelp!" cried Dave, "didn't he go fur to lay you out? Then what is thar to excuse? He got a hot spoonful of his own gruel, that's all."

"But he'll play hob with me when he comes round!" urged the stranger, with ludicrous concern.

Everybody laughed, and most swore.

This was the flabbiest man that had ever come to Bloody Run.

"Come! come!" exclaimed Old-man Crocker, who liked equally well to set men or dogs to fight, "the Run ain't goin' fur to stop so. What's the matter with you, Harrigan? Ain't this hyar

the chance you've been waitin' fur? What's the reason it ain't?"

"I likes to take somethin' as'll make it interestin' when I trouble myself," replied Harrigan.

"Waal, hain't he made it interestin' fur Chippy? Chippy's as good a man as you, an' day." "Maybe he is, an' maybe he ain't," replied Mr. Harrigan, with a show of asperity.

There was a long-standing grudge between him and Old-man Crocker's jackal, which had never been fought out.

The fact was, the old quip applied to these two perfectly: "One's afraid, and the other daresn't!"

"Bah!" scoffed Old-man Crocker. "I believe you're afraid of him!"

Harrigan colored with humiliation as the eyes of his companions turned upon him derisively.

Men of such reputations as Old man Crocker and Dandy Dave enjoyed, could afford to scorn one who had shown himself far more plucky than the stranger, but with Harrigan it was different. His position not assured, he was bound to maintain it whenever challenged.

At the same time it hurt his vanity to be forced to prove his prowess on one whose cowardice was universally recognized.

"You know better'n that," he growled, sullenly.

"That's so," corroborated the Teaser, quickly. "It's all the other way—I'm afeard o' him. So, ef you please, Mr. Man, I'll be a heap obleeged to ye not to put yourself out fur to set this hyar gent onto me. I—"

"Talk's cheap!" sneered Old-man Crocker, still jeering Harrigan.

"I'll knock his two eyes into one!" growled the Irishman, stung by the taunt.

"Don't! don't!" pleaded the stranger. "Pard, I'll take your word fur it. I will, so!"

"Harrigan passes!" giped Crocker. "He's a corker, he is—a healthy corker!"

With a furious oath, Harrigan made a sudden rush at the man who stood apparently trembling before him, and with whom he was being baited as a bull is with a red flag.

Seeing him coming, the stranger uttered a yell of terror, and fled through the open door.

Harrigan plunged after him, and for an instant they passed out of sight of the crowd.

With roars of laughter, everybody started for the door, eager to see the enraged Irishman "mount" the fugitive when he overtook him.

But before any one reached the door there was a crash of glass, and a body shot in through the window, and fell upon the floor in a limp heap.

Everybody gathered about and stared, in equal bewilderment.

How had it happened? Harrigan had scarcely set foot out of the door, before here he was back again, his return quite as expeditious, and certainly as unceremonious, as his exit.

"Boys," he gasped, with the unfailing readiness of a Westerner to take a humorous view of anything, "was it a cyclone?"

The sound of shuffling footsteps at the door attracted every eye that way, and there stood the Teaser, apparently "shaking in his shoes" as he peered into the saloon.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BOUNCER BOUNCED.

"DID you fling him in through that winder?" demanded Crocker, staring at the trembling fugitive.

"Me?" was the deprecating reply. "Now, really, gents, I hope you won't hold me responsible. Ye see, it's jest like this. When I git skeered—an' I git skeered so mighty easy—I ain't accountable fur what I may do. It's temporary insanity—that's what it is; an' the minute after I couldn't say, fur the life o' me, what I'd done, or what I didn't do. That's the Lord's truth, an' I hope the gent ain't hurt none—"

"Hurt none!" growled Harrigan. "I'm all broke up!"

And he made as much ado picking himself up, as if he had literally to collect the pieces of his aching anatomy.

"Waal," said Dandy Dave, slowly, "things is lookin' a leetle mixed. Your men don't seem to pan out overly so-so."

"I reckon," retorted Old-man Crocker, with some show of feeling, "that we've got some man in this hyar camp what kin git away with this scalweegian! Whar's the Bouncer?"

He looked about until his eyes rested upon a stockily-built man, with a bullet head and the jaw of a bull-dog.

"Billy," he said, "is the camp done yit?"

"He's been playin' off on ye," remarked Billy the Bouncer, eying the stranger keenly.

"Waal, you ain't afeard fur to tackle him, be ye?"

"I reckon not. He ain't a-throwin' of me through no winders—bet yer sweet life!"

"Gents! gents!" pleaded the Teaser, plaintively, "be you bound fur to use me up entirely?"

"I hain't feelin' well, I tell yer!" he continued, with a touch of petulance. "Gi' me a rest till to-morrow, an' I'll git a friend what'll see you chaps all day."

"You stand to the rock, you ole fraud," ordered Old-man Crocker, roughly.

"My Christian friend!" pleaded the Teaser, making his appeal to the Bouncer, in seeming utter desperation, "ef you'll call it a go, I'll lay right down, an' let ye walk over me."

"That ain't my style," replied the Bouncer. "You stan's yer show, fair an' square, an' ef you git away with me, it's because you're a better man."

"My holt is wrastlin'."

"Wrastlin'?" almost shrieked the Teaser. "You kin jest mop the floor with me, easy! Back-holt, side-holt, squar'-holt—I ain't jest nothin' at them. Fur the love o' God, do it easy!"

And joining his hands in pleading, he looked piteously at the Bouncer.

Now the Bouncer was not to be fooled by any of this sort of chaff.

As he deliberately rolled up his sleeves, displaying the muscles that lay fold upon fold under the smooth skin, he closely eyed the man before him.

"Thar ought to be some money up on this," observed Dandy Dave.

"Maybe you've got some to put up," retorted Old-man Crocker, irritated by the stand his rival was gradually assuming in the matter.

"You bet!" was the quiet rejoinder.

And Dandy Dave coolly drew forth his wallet.

"Hyar's two to on the Teaser."

This was a wanton insult, and Old-man Crocker returned wrathfully:

"I'll go you even to any amount you da'st to put up!"

"I'll go my pile," said Dandy Dave, emptying his bag of coins on a table.

Crocker covered the amount, and asked, sneeringly:

"Have you got any friends what 'u'd like to keep you in countenance?"

But the Bouncer's reputation was "A 1," and not swayed by the same feelings that prompted Dave, no one else cared to risk his money on the chance of the stranger's proving what all began to suspect.

"Now," said Old-man Crocker, with a menacing flash of the eye, "ef he gits away with you, I'll—"

But he left his purpose unstated.

"Use him up!" he substituted, viciously.

"Ef I git my grip on him, I'll make it interesting fur him, ef I don't do no more," said Billy.

Backing away as the Bouncer advanced, the Teaser began to cower and whimper. His knees knocked together, and he seemed ready to fall in a shapeless heap at the touch.

At last Billy saw—or thought he saw—his opening, and sprang for him.

"O-o-oh!" shrieked the Teaser, and he seemed to go down like a limp rag.

But he rose again, with his assailant on his shoulders, for he had thrust his head between the Bouncer's legs.

A moment Billy pawed the air wildly, and then, having described the regular curve of a projectile, landed on his head several feet away.

The crash was enough to have broken the neck or fractured the skull of an ordinary man, for of all falls in wrestling this is perhaps the most dangerous.

But the Bouncer had a head of iron, and the muscles in his bull neck were tough enough to stand almost any strain.

Even he, however, was dazed somewhat, as he struggled to his feet and stood staring about in blind fury.

Old-man Crocker was speechless with astonishment and incredulity. He could not persuade himself that this thing had really happened, and with so little apparent effort on the part of the Teaser.

Not so Dandy Dave.

"Hi! hi!" he yelled. "What's gone with the Bouncer? Pick 'im up again!"

The crowd were swept off their feet with wondering delight. Everybody surged forward to stare at the man whose execution was in such marked contrast with his pretensions.

There were men in plenty who "traveled on their war-record," they being their own chroniclers. But what manner of man was this, who only begged to be spared, while he annihilated everything that came in contact with him?

"Whoop!" yelled an enthusiastic admirer. "I go my pile on the Teaser ag'in' anything in Bloody Run!"

"Gents! gents!" pleaded the Teaser, holding up his hands in deprecation.

But his voice was drowned.

"Stow that gaff, ole man! We've dropped to ye solid, though we dropped to ye slow."

"Everythin' as has come anigh ye has dropped! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Hold on," cried Billy the Bouncer, who was loth to see his record rubbed out with a swipe of this sort. "I ain't done yit. Ary man may be taken unbeknownst at a new game."

"Why, that's as old as the hills."

"It ain't old with me, you bet yer life."

"Better throw up yer hand before he knocks the spots off of every keerd in it."

"That's his privilege, ef he's got the sand."

"But, gents, you don't seem to onderstand," pleaded the Teaser.

"Time! time!" shouted the crowd.

"I didn't git my grip on him," said Billy the Bouncer, advancing again, but even more warily than before.

"Pard," whimpered the Teaser, "you kin git ary grip what suits ye best, ef you'll only lay me down easy. Don't hurt me! I didn't go fur to land you over thar—'pon me soul, I didn't. It's jest the crazy fit what gits on me when I'm skeered out o' my boots. Thar! thar! go easy, pard. I— Oh Lord!"

Billy saw his chance again, and closed.

The Teaser seemed unable to oppose him. You would have thought that he could not lift a finger for sheer terror.

The arms of the Bouncer closed about him like bands of steel. Billy exerted himself to the utmost to crush the wind out of his antagonist. From the strain of his muscles it seemed as if the very bones of the other's body ought to be heard to crack.

"Now, curse you!" he gritted, between his set teeth.

"Oh! ah! ugh!" grunted the Teaser, so that his new-made backers began to think that they had been too hasty in their concessions. "Have ye got that thar grip what ye was talkin' about?"

"You bet I have," returned the Bouncer, gathering his powers for a mighty effort to lift his adversary off his feet and hurl him to the ground with a crash that should knock out of his body the little breath his fierce hug had left in it.

"Easy! easy! fur the love o' God, easy!" begged the Teaser. "I'm— Ugh! ah! I'm a goner!"

But somehow he kept his feet for all that, and the two went surging and swaying about, scattering the crowd that pressed around them, not to lose a point of the struggle.

"Down him, Billy! down him!" yelled the admirers of the Bouncer.

"Hi, thar! Now you've got him! Give him the knee tip!"

"Lock his off hoof, an' he's yours!"

"Whoop him up on the other tack! Thar! thar! that's somethin' like!"

But meanwhile, in spite of this encouragement, Billy was learning that his first overthrow was probably not as accidental as he had said and believed.

Twist and trip, writhe and strain as he might, the stranger was a veritable cat, for always coming down on his feet, while, as for the hug of the Bouncer, though the spectators did not suspect it, it was repaid with interest.

The Teaser's arms were like clamps of steel.

Meanwhile, that enigmatical individual had all the appearance of a man in the agony of abject fear. His face was distorted with a grimace of distress, and his eyes rolled about in despairing supplication.

"Hoo-oo-oo!" he bellowed, like a great calf of a hobbledohoy receiving a thrashing from the schoolmaster. "Im skeered! I'm skeered!"

Then followed a performance that amazed every beholder.

The wrestlers began to spin about like devil-possessed Dervishes. Here, there, everywhere, they whirled through the crowd, their flying stogies rapping the shins and ribs of the hustling mob, so that on one in reach of whom they came seemed to escape a painful token of their passage.

Wilder and wilder grew this devil's dance, as the Teaser's voice became a howl of terror, until the Bouncer's feet lost their hold upon the ground, and he was whirled round and round, with his heels thrashing the air.

Suddenly the Teaser let go his hold, and Billy was flung heels over head into the crowd, retaining a desperate clutch only on the raglan his antagonist wore.

The Teaser had but to bend forward his body and throw up his arms, to have the garment skinned over his head, so as to leave him entirely free from the grip of which Billy had boasted.

The Bouncer was not much hurt by his fall, for he carried down half a dozen men under him; but he was thoroughly convinced that he had no further use for the man he had undertaken to "bounce."

Old-man Crocker stared blankly, boiling with wrath.

Dandy Dave was not disposed to "let up on him."

"Waal," he drawled, "he's about used your crowd up, hain't he?"

Crocker did not reply. He was looking at the man, to make out how he had accomplished what he had done.

"That reminds me of an old saw what's got millions in it," pursued Dave.

"Never send a boy to mill," he drawled, with a tantalizing chuckle.

The hint was too broad to be mistaken. Crocker flushed, and turned his eyes toward his tormentor.

"Maybe you think I'd orter back my crowd," he said, with a savage glare.

"Keno!"

"Maybe you 'low as he kin clean me out, too!"

"I'm a-leavin' of my stakes on the board."

"An' I'm a-coverin' of 'em!"

Having placed his stake, he turned toward the stranger with a sullen glitter in his eyes.

"Ef you kin bolt Ole-man Crocker," he said, in hoarse, guttural tones, "you're goin' fur to git the chance. But thar ain't no boy's-play about me. I use weepens what air made fur men."

And drawing his bowie, he jabbed it into the door-jamb, to be in readiness when he had stripped for the fight.

His preparations consisted in removing his upper clothing, until he stood in his trowsers and boots, displaying a body the muscles of which swelled like bundles of whipcord.

He laid aside his revolvers, but tightened about his waist the belt that carried them, and stood, a rugged Ajax.

While he was making these preparations, Dandy Dave took the stranger to one side, as if to act as his second.

But his purpose was quite different from what the crowd was led to suppose, as was proved by his words, spoken so low that no one but the man addressed heard.

"Stranger, whoever and whatever you be, it's plain—an' I'm free to acknowledge the corn—that you kin git away with the best of us. You're goin' fur to be cock-o'-the walk in this hyar camp, ef you care to claim what's yer due, an' you're let to fight yer way without no pistol-practice. Maybe you'd clean us out with the shootin'-irons, too, but I reckon you'd jest as lieve not carry the thing to that pint ef it kin be helped."

"I ain't no butcher, an' I don't keer to be slaughtered," interpolated the Teaser, plaintively.

"Thar ain't no need o' that," was Dandy Dave's assurance.

"Ain't yan galoot a-gittin' ready, now, fur to salt me down fur winter use?"

"No, he ain't. This hyar's a purty tough town, but we don't all jump onto an' chaw up a galoot who happens to bid fur elbow-room. Ef you've got the sand to fight yer way to the top, you go thar, an' have a fair show fur ter keep yer heart in yer body. Ef thar's any slaughterin' to be done, it's afterwards, in a fair fight, fur cause."

"That ain't sayin' as Ole-man Crocker ain't about as ornery as they make 'em, an' ef he sees the thing goin' ag'in' him, I don't go bail as he won't kick over the traces. That's your look-out. But that ain't what the bill calls fur."

"He'll salt me!" whined the Teaser.

"Howsomever," pursued Dandy Dave, not displaying any particular concern about the Teaser's ultimate fate, "what I wanted to say is jest this: After you've finished him, it'll be my turn. The boys'll look fur it, ye know."

"Waal, I've always allowed as I was some on sparrin', but I cave. I know a handy man when I see him, an' you top ary thing as I've ever sot my two peepers on, an' I ain't no chicken."

"But, pard, I've run this hyar camp so long that it won't be easy fur me to take a back seat, not even along of Ole-man Crocker, an' I do 'low as I'd druther step down an' out with him jest ahead o' me, than with ary other man I ever see. So it struck me as how maybe you hadn't no particular call fur to put this hyar camp in yer breeches pocket, not 'lowin', maybe, to hang out hyar reg'lar, an' as how you might be willin' fur to let me off with enough p'int's fur to save my bacon, an' keep my holt on 'the boys. Ef so be ye could find it in yer to do this hyar, stranger, you won't have no call fur to regret standin' in with Dandy Dave. I'll make you my right bower, an' I'll agree to run this camp to the line you chalk down, only to let on to the boys as it's me as is a-runnin' of it."

This was not an easy proposition to make. Dandy Dave alternately flushed and turned pale, as he forced himself to stammer through the words. If the stranger chose to "give him away," he would be covered with infamy—worse yet, for a man of his vanity—with ridicule. He would be forced to fight it out, with a prospect of being killed, and with no chance of recovering his old position, even if he succeeded in killing his man.

The Teaser stared at him with dropped jaw.

"You kin knock me out easy, boss," was all he answered. "I ain't nothin' at sparrin' an' sich. Never could git the hang of it."

Dandy Dave found little comfort in this. The Teaser had neither indicated acquiescence nor rejection, and before Dave could press for a determination of the matter one way or the other, Old-man Crocker "called time" on them.

"Air you goin' fur to stand thar all day?"

"Boss," answered the Teaser, "ef so be you could find it in ye fur to let me off, I'll make tracks out o' this hyar camp—the which I never would 'a' sot foot in it ef I had a-knowed what was waitin' fur me hyar—an' never show up no more."

"Not much!" demurred Old-man Crocker, strong in his faith in his own prowess, and thinking that here was a good chance to add to his terrible reputation. "You toe the scratch fur

the fu'st blood, an' ef you ain't satisfied then, we'll fight to a finish."

"I'm a dead man!" groaned the Teaser.

"Why, gents, I hain't got nothin' but this hyar ole toad-stabber!"

And stooping, he drew from his boot-leg a bowie-knife with a blade not far from twelve inches in length.

This he held up, and looked about as if appealing to them to acknowledge that nothing could be expected from a man armed with so insignificant a weapon.

"Waal, I'll swear," declared one, while all stared open-mouthed, "I don't want nothin' worse'n that thar a-rootin' around in my in-'ards!"

And this—with very good reason, one would think—was the general sentiment.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TEASER "DOWNED."

"PEEL!" commanded Old-man Crocker, impatient at the delay.

"Ef it's all the same to you, I'll keep my duds on," whimpered the Teaser. "I don't want to git no clobber to that thar thing than I kin help."

"Play yer own hand, only don't keep us all day a-waitin'."

The Teaser had but to roll up his sleeves, when he was ready.

From the first he fought shy of Old-man Crocker's gleaming bowie, retreating so that he kept the crowd in constant motion following him about.

"Stand to the rack, you blasted coward!" roared Crocker. "Do you think I hain't got nothin' to do but to straddle around through seventeen counties after you?"

"I ain't askin' of ye fur to keep follerin' me," whined the Teaser. "I tell ye I'm skeered of ye!"

And, as if to prove his words, as Old-man Crocker prodded at him, he leaped away with a startled yell.

Crocker swore lustily, as he strove to come to close quarters, ever defeated by the agility of his retreating antagonist.

The crowd began to chaff the Teaser.

Only Dandy Dave remained silent.

He observed what the others were too excited to think of—that Old-man Crocker did not succeed in inflicting the slightest wound on the stranger, though the latter had been forced to parry some vicious thrusts, to escape.

Presently the Teaser backed up against a tree, as if by inadvertence.

"That fixes him!" yelled one of Old-man Crocker's friends. "Now, jump him, Crocker!"

The latter had received the same impression, and summoning all his powers to the effort, he leaped for his man.

There was a blood-curdling gride, as steel rasped over steel, the keen edges of the bowies testing each other's temper.

Old-man Crocker's rush was fairly checked, and he had failed to inflict any wound.

"Curse you!" he gritted through his teeth, as he strained his wrist until the sinews stood out like whipcords, and his forehead became purple.

But the Teaser only replied:

"I'm skeered! I'm skeered! Don't hurt me, boss!—don't hurt me!"

And, as if in wild panic, he began to fight furiously, his knife slashing the air in every direction, like lightning.

Suddenly Old-man Crocker leaped back, with an ejaculation of rage.

"Hah! You've cut me!"

And this was true, for a red streak appeared across his forearm, from which the blood presently dripped down to his fingers.

"Boss, I hope you will excuse me!" pleaded the stranger, standing as if terror-stricken by what he had done.

"First blood!" shouted Dandy Dave, snatching off his hat, and flinging it into the air.

"Hurrah fur the Teaser!"

The spectators for the most part burst into wild cheers and yells of triumph, save that one of Old-man Crocker's spaniels cried:

"Foul! Foul!"

But Old-man Crocker himself heard but one voice—that of his rival, Dandy Dave. It stung him to the quick, and aggravated his defeat a hundredfold.

"First nothin'!" he shouted, as near as custom will permit the rendering of the spirit rather than the exact form of his expression.

And, with a snarl like that of a baffled demon, he leaped back to the fray, this time with unmistakable deadly intent.

This was what Dandy Dave had predicted. In vain he now shouted:

"Cheese it, Crocker! The Teaser has won fairly, an' you hain't no call fur to lay into him like that."

Old-man Crocker paid not the slightest heed.

It was man to man, and he knew that if he could "get away with" the Teaser, he might do so with impunity.

Receiving Old-man Crocker's blade once more on his own, the Teaser executed a sudden combined sweeping and twisting cut, and wrenched his adversary's weapon from his grasp.

As it flew into the air, he presented the point

of his bowie at the breast of the would-be murderer. One thrust, and he could have buried it to the hilt in the heart that meditated his death.

Old-man Crocker threw up his hands, expecting that that moment was his last of earth.

He knew that his purpose had been read by every one there present, and it never entered his head to expect any clemency from the foe he had justly provoked to retaliation.

But the Teaser lowered the point of his weapon, and coolly thrust it into his boot-leg.

"Gents," he said, "I hadn't orter be trusted with deadly weepens, an' that's a fact. I git skeered so easy, an' when I do git skeered I'm reckless, an' don't know what I'm doin', no-how."

"Waal, I'll swear as it is dangerous fur you to have deadly weepens around," said one of the crowd, significantly, while all the others gathered about to gaze on this man of might, and pay him homage.

If he was going to be "cock-of-the-walk"—and it looked very much that way—it might be well to begin at once to curry favor with him.

Old-man Crocker accepted his defeat in sullen silence. After his overthrow it would not do to make any further attempt at the life of the man who had conquered him.

The boys might overlook a blow in the sudden burst of chagrin following upon defeat, but they wouldn't stand cold-blooded malice. That they would call murder, and would requite by stringing him up to the nearest tree.

But there was one consolation yet open to him. If he must knock under, it would be something to have Dandy Dave share in his discomfiture, and, remembering the terrific force of the wrench that had disarmed him, he suddenly came to the conclusion that the stranger, who had started at the bottom of the ladder, could mount the last round, and oust Dandy Dave, too, from his eminence.

He got his chance when Dandy Dave said to him:

"I'm sorry to take yer money, ole man, but I allow as it was earnt as fair and squar' as ary mill I ever see."

"It's your turn next," replied Crocker, "an' maybe you kin do better than I done."

"Waal, as to that," replied Dandy Dave, hiding his real anxiety under a mask of good-natured indifference, "I begin to 'low as we got the wrong pig by the ear when we proposed to throw off on this stranger. I don't know as I kin make it interestin' fur him, but after he's rested a mite, I don't mind takin' a lesson in sparrin' from him, jest to see his style."

This was a very clever way to hedge. If the Teaser did not accede to his proposal of a few minutes before, Dave at least paved the way to step down from his place as gracefully as might be, while, if he did help to throw dust in the boys' eyes, a modest beginning would not detract from the luster of a seeming victory over the man who had "downed" Old-man Crocker.

The Teaser promptly answered, in his own peculiar way, the proposal that he should rest.

"Ef it's all the same to you, I'd druther take my lickin' all at once."

The boys laughed uproariously at this sally. It is easy to laugh at the jokes of "the coming man!"

"Waal," smiled Dandy Dave, "I 'low as I shan't thrash you any to speak of, but I promise to give you the best I've got."

He stripped, as Old-man Crocker had, but the Teaser said:

"Bein's as I ain't nothin' at sparrin', it won't pay to make a fuss gittin' ready."

And, as before, he retained his clothes.

Dandy Dave was prouder of nothing than of his appearance stripped to the waist for the "fistic arena," as sporting papers grandiloquently phrase it. And indeed he had reason to expect the admiration of any one who could appreciate magnificent physical development.

Old-man Crocker was of powerful build; Dandy Dave was of elegant build. His skin was as smooth and white, and apparently as hard, as ivory. The muscles looked as if they might have been chiseled by some old Greek master, who had learned his art at the Olympic games.

When he took his position, every line was a curve of graceful strength.

The Teaser posed awkwardly—so awkwardly, indeed, that Dandy Dave experienced a thrill of renewed hope.

What if he should really be deficient in "the manly art?" Of course Dave would rather make one honest point against him than to have him yield a dozen.

"It is understood," said Dave, "that this ain't no sluggin' mill. It's fur points."

"Ef that's easier than t'other," replied the Teaser, "it suits me better. My ole ribs won't stand much thumpin', an' I hain't got no beauty to spare."

"But how air we to tell who's the best man?" objected Old-man. "Thar must be at least one knock-down at the finish."

He did not propose to let Dandy Dave off without the humiliation of a complete overthrow.

"Waal," said Dave, "we'll go fur the points first, an' then we'll see whose steadiest on his pins."

He feared that the stranger would not submit to a knock-down. How many men would, when there was nothing to be gained by it that they could not command if they chose? If, then, Dave could beat him honestly at "science," that would give the battle something the look of a draw, at least.

At the outset Dandy Dave fought warily, feeling of his man. He skipped about as lightly as a French dancing-master, feinting and recovering with a dexterity and grace that called forth bursts of applause from the spectators.

The Teaser was much heavier on his feet. Indeed, had he been shod with leaden sandals, he could scarcely have clomped about more ungracefully.

He did not dodge Dandy Dave's blows, but he had a knack of stopping them as if they had been delivered against a stone wall.

This was trying, not only to the strength, but to the nerves of his opponent. It winded him, and discouraged him, more than any other tactics could have done.

When the Teaser got in his left duke, making the first point, Dave made up his mind that he was to gain nothing by having humbled himself to ask for favor.

A "hot one" on the jaw is not a temper-sweetener at any time, and it is not to be wondered at that Dave "reached for" his man with a little more earnestness after that.

Presently he landed a "brick house" between the Teaser's eyes, and ducked the counter so cleverly that the boys cheered him wildly.

That put him in a better humor, and when he got in his right in an upper cut that would have lifted many a man off his pins, he was quite himself again.

"I reckon I don't need to ask no odds of him," he began to think, forgetting, as we are all too apt to under similar circumstances, that the Teaser might have left that opening on purpose.

So the struggle proceeded, Dandy Dave getting the best of it, though the stranger proved himself a handy man. If he threw off at all, he did it so cleverly that no one—not even Old-man Crocker—suspected it.

As he watched the thing, and began to be persuaded that Dave was going to triumph where he had come to grief, Crocker was consumed with jealous fury.

"It's only his cussed science," he growled within himself. "That don't count fur nothing, only fancy. What's wantin' between them two is a leetle pistol practice."

And he began to cast about for some pretext by which he could provoke them to a deadly encounter. All that was necessary was to put Dave in a "hole," where he would have to fight or flunk. He was plucky enough, and his vanity would keep him from "crawfishing."

While he was thinking over the matter, the stranger underwent an abrupt change.

He dropped his jaw, and stared with a set gaze, involuntarily lowering his guard a trifle, presenting the appearance of a man who had suddenly gone "groggy."

Though the spectators did not notice it, he was looking beyond Dandy Dave, and a little to one side.

The fact was, he had caught sight of a man and woman who were approaching, walking companionably side by side, the woman chatting gayly, the man hanging upon her words with more than formal politeness.

This spectacle was such a shock to the Teaser, that his vacant look was not affected. For the moment he forgot Dandy Dave and the business in hand.

"My God!" he was saying to himself.

A pain, sharper than any Dandy Dave could inflict, shot through his heart, and left him dazed and panting.

Of course Dave knew nothing of this. He saw the chance for which he was longing, though he had scarcely dared hope for it, and made the most of it without a moment's hesitancy.

His right shot out straight from the shoulder, with terrific force, and, as the Teaser's head was slightly turned, crashed into his neck just at the base of the jaw, like a battering-ram.

The Teaser "went to grass" like a tree struck by lightning.

He lay where he fell, too, well-nigh bereft of consciousness—in fact, knocked out.

Such a yell as signaled the Teaser's fall, such frantic climbing over one another, to be the first to lay congratulatory hands on the victor when it was known that the stranger was really knocked out, were never heard and seen—well, outside of the New York Stock Exchange, or the Chicago Chamber of Commerce just after a break in some wheat "corner."

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!" says the poet. It certainly must be an uncomfortable abode for people of quiet habits, if it has anything to compare with a man who sees the chance to make or lose a fortune dependent upon his success in making himself heard, in competition with a hundred others in like strait, or if its demons are half as vociferous as an earthly crowd, when the favorite gets in a finisher on the jugular of his antagonist, in the third round.

Dandy Dave was patted on the back. Some

even stroked him, affectionately. Both hands were shaken, with a vigor that would have been decidedly painful to any but a trained athlete, his congratulators seizing him anywhere below the elbows.

Then some one shouted:

"Up he goes, boys!"

And he was caught off his feet and mounted on the shoulders of his admirers.

Then such cheering, such yells! Every one felt that he had saved the credit of the camp.

Even Old-man Crocker and his crowd joined in this demonstration, but in a half-hearted way that thinly disguised the jealousy that gnawed at their vitals.

Never in his life had Dandy Dave felt so elated. He fairly loved the stranger who had been instrumental in bringing him this honor.

He got out of the hands of his friends as soon as possible and sought the Teaser.

"Pard," he said, gripping his hand warmly, "you're a long ways the best man that ever stood up before me. I reckon it 'ud be nip an' tuck ef you didn't lay me out the next clatter."

The Teaser had been left to come to himself and get on his pins at his leisure.

There was nothing tender about the men of Bloody Run. They knew that he would come round in time without their help, so no one concerned himself with what was not his especial business.

It thus happened that no one noticed him when he rose, and looked after the man and woman who turned aside so as not to pass through the yelling crowd.

They passed on to a shanty at the end of the camp, standing a little apart from its neighbors, where the lady gave her hand in parting, in a way which could have but one significance.

The Teaser was so overcome by what he saw, that he leaned against a tree, and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, like a man who had been dazed by a great shock.

When Dandy Dave went to him, he was pale and haggard, and his hand trembled.

The boys thought that the last blow had used him up.

"It's early in the day to be remindin' you of yer promise," said he to Dave, in a tone guarded so that the others might not hear, "but ef so be thar's an empty shanty what you could turn over to me as handy as not, I 'low as I'll turn in fur a spell by myself. I'm feelin' qualmish, an' thar's a fact."

Dandy Dave felt that this was a quiet intimation of the real nature of his seeming victory. It fell like a souse of cold water on his elation. He had persuaded himself into a belief in the genuineness of his success.

"Thar's jest what ye want," he said, swallowing his chagrin—"a snanty what its owner left when he went up higher, only last week. But as he got his ticket of Old-man Crocker, maybe he feels as if he had a sort of claim on it."

But Crocker readily waived any title that might have vested in him through his summary disposal of the late proprietor, and the Teaser at once took possession of the vacant estate.

Closing the door after him, the Teaser cast himself face-downward on the bunk, to lie shaken by such sobs as are forced from a strong man.

"Not that! anything but that! Oh, my God!" he groaned, clutching the blanket that covered his bunk, in an agony of soul terrible to see.

And this man was Six-foot Si; and those two were Bob Cady's sweetheart and Bob Cady's murderer!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GHOST OF BOB CADY.

THE effect on Joe Moran of the mysterious warning, coming at the time it did, was tremendous.

He had been on his guard against the outlaws whom he had betrayed, but he had supposed that Bob Cady was silenced forever.

Now this scrap of paper told him that an avenger of his murdered "pardner" was on his track.

How confident he must be of his power to strike, and strike home, whenever he chose, that he should warn his victim of his approach.

It was plain that he was not satisfied merely with the old law—"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!" He was resolved to fill the days while he permitted his victim to live, with the haunting horror of impending doom.

Joe Moran had in abundance that hardy physical courage which does not shrink from meeting death even-handed. Where he could strike blow for blow, he would stand undaunted before anything in human form.

But how was he to contend with this phantom, whom he might never see, even when he launched the bolt that would transform everything in the twinkling of an eye?

Waking or sleeping, this terrible presence would ever be hovering near. Walking abroad, he would lurk in every covert. At home, bolts and bars would not shut him out. The very air was full of him!

With shuddering horror Joe Moran recalled an incident of the awful night in which he had

imbued his hands in the blood of the man he was sworn to stand by with a faithfulness beyond that due a brother.

In the darkness Bob Cady was fleeing before him down a mountain road. Again and again had Joe fired in the direction of his flying footsteps, until the click of the falling hammer followed by no report told that he had emptied the chambers of his revolver.

Then came an inarticulate cry and a dull thud, and he knew that the fugitive, struck hard at last, had fallen upon his face.

Possessed by the ferocious frenzy which leads the murderer to mutilate his victim, that the last possible spark of life may be stamped out, Joe Moran had leaped upon the body of his prostrate partner with drawn bowie.

At that moment he had heard a thrilling *click! click!* as ominous as the deadly warning of the rattlesnake, and some hand in the darkness had pressed the cold muzzle of a revolver against his forehead.

With a shriek of terror he had leaped up from the body of the murdered man, and had sped back to the shanty where they had had their awful death-struggle in solitude and darkness.

From that day to this Joe Moran had never learned who had driven him, like a hawk, from his prey.

Now he believed that the same hand had manifested itself a second time.

In sudden rage, a revolt against his sense of helplessness, he plucked out his revolver, and set himself to find some trace of his secret foe.

It was useless. Whoever it was, he had come and gone as one who treads the impalpable air.

His rage having exhausted itself, Moran was left with an icy sense of fear such as he had never before experienced.

Pale, trembling, his very knees knocking together, his eyes wandering furtively from side to side, he left the haunted shanty, and sought the protection of numbers.

His first recourse was the one most natural to such a man—drink.

"Set 'em up, Johnny!" he cried, with a sort of hysterical hilarity. "Boys, don't be barshful. Step up! step up! It's as free as the air ye breathe an' the water ye wash in!"

They needed no second bidding. Bummer Boggs led the van!

"Hooray!" he yelled. "When a man's in luck, he wants all the world to be happy."

Everybody laughed, understanding this as an allusion to Moran's recent parting with Miss Falmouth.

"Sutter owes you one fur yer hint," said Old-man Crocker, losing no opportunity to give Dandy Dave a stab.

"Oh, he's a holy terror!" replied Boggs. "I knowed as all the gay young bucks hadn't gone up the flume."

Moran glanced covertly at Dandy Dave, but the boss of the town wore a very unconcerned air.

If he had shown any hesitancy about partaking of the hospitalities extended to all, Moran would at once have fixed upon him as his hidden foe.

Come to think of it, what was more natural? Here was a rival who knew—as did every one else, for that matter—of his past history.

Open hostility would defeat its own aim, if the lady was at all favorable to Moran. Then what was more likely than a resort to underhand means of driving him from the camp by a system of terrorization?

"Curse him! ef I see his hand in this hyar," reflected Moran, "I'll crowd him into a quarrel, an' then ef he's a better man than me, I'll step down an' out, an' leave him a clear field."

But Dandy Dave stepped up to the bar quite cheerfully.

"Good luck to you, pard," said he, holding up his glass, as is customary in proposing a toast. "May you never want a bower when thar's a queen on the board."

The fact was that, quite unsuspecting of Joe Moran's hostility, Dandy Dave was only intent on parrying Old-man Crocker's thrusts.

To change the subject, Dave commended to Moran's notice the new-comer, whom he had undertaken to chaperon.

"This hyar gent," he said, "what hails to the handle of Teaser, might set fur Modesty on a monument. Howsomer, he's a Texas blizzard when he breaks loose. He's showed as he kin cut about as broad a swath as ary man I ever see, at ary thing he puts his hand to. How I'd like to see you tackle him at draw-poker—the which you swing a nasty hand at that same queer leetle game—an' I hope he won't come down on you so rough as he has on the rest of us."

Of course this magnanimous speech cost Dandy Dave nothing, since it appeared that he alone had proved able to cope with the stranger.

But Six-foot Si could not submit himself to the ordeal into which circumstances seemed about to force him. He had come here to kill Joe Moran; he had found on his arrival a state of things so seemingly impossible that he had been stunned, and all of his plans thrown into confusion. The custom of the country, so firmly established that there was no appeal, made it in-

evitable that he should drink with Moran, or betray his hostility by a refusal.

This much, then he yielded, but he could not bring himself to sit down with him at play.

"Gents," he said, "hyar's whar I draw the line. I don't gamble."

"What!" cried Dandy Dave, in astonishment, while everybody within earshot stared much as if he had announced that he had abandoned the useless custom of eating prevalent among men.

As if to settle the question without further parley, the Teaser silently drew his breeches pockets inside out.

"Oa, waal, is that all?" exclaimed Dandy Dave. "We'll mighty soon fix that."

And without hesitancy he drew forth his own wallet, and slapped it on the table.

"Pard," he said, "when that's gone, I reckon we kin raise as much more without goin' out o' the camp to do it."

"I'll stand my quota," said Old-man Crocker, who knew that nothing was so popular as the appearance of not bearing malice.

"Waal, now, really, gents," stammered the Teaser, with marked emotion, "you do me proud—you do, so! But I can't take yer money, ye know. I wouldn't never have no show o' payin' it back."

"Nonsense!" protested Dandy Dave, with a smiling wink. "We've dropped to you, ole man. You can't come that dodge any more. When you've cleaned out Sam Sutter, you kin set 'em up fur the boys. Ole Boggs, hyar, is in fur that."

"Waal, now, you bet!" declared the hummer, emphatically. "These hyar," with a wave of the hand which included Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker, "air public-spirited men. They're puttin' up their money on ye so's the community at large kin reap the benefit. Now, it don't stan' to reason as you'd knock sich a great an' glorious scheme in the head by flunkin' their patriotic example."

"Ef so be I seen a show to further the cause o' free whisky, nothin' would do me prouder than to lend myself to the scheme. But the fact is, gents, I've give it to ye straight. I don't never gamble, an' I hardly know one keerd from another."

"But, don't ye see," pleaded Bummer Boggs, earnestly, "ef Sutter cleans you out, he sets 'em up. So public spirit has free play either way."

"But that won't refund these gents their money," insisted Si, firmly.

"Oh, don't crowd the mourners!" sneered a would-be beneficiary, in disgust at his disappointment.

"Six-foot Si had spoken so seriously that the others took him at his word, and dropped the matter, though not without an evident abatement of their enthusiasm.

They had little use for a man who didn't gamble.

"The country's goin' to the dogs!" wailed Bummer Boggs, pathetically.

Joe Moran scanned the Teaser narrowly. He, too, was suspicious of a man who didn't gamble. If that was so, what was his business in that part of the country, and especially in such a camp as Bloody Run? If it was only a pretext, what scheme did it cover?

Could this be the foe against whom he must be on his guard?

He listened closely to the story of the Teaser's exploits since his advent in the camp.

The man might be only one of those eccentric characters of whom the West is full, whose individuality crops out in all sorts of absurdities, no two being alike.

His hobby was evidently self-detraction, by contrast with which he hoped to make his actions the more striking.

The next crank might adopt a course exactly the reverse. Indeed, the blow-hards were vastly in the majority.

On the other hand, the whole might be affected for a purpose.

Moving about the room with seeming carelessness, chatting with this one and that one, Joe Moran elicited enough facts about the Teaser to satisfy himself that his suspicions were groundless.

The Teaser had been seen riding into the camp from the side opposite to Moran's shanty, and had gone directly to the Bucking Burro.

Joe, returning to the company of Miss Falmouth, had seen him at the culmination of his mill with Dandy Dave.

Between that time and the finding of the warning, there had been no chance of his reaching Joe's shanty before him.

More and more perplexed, Moran entered upon a night of deep drinking and reckless gambling.

Dandy Dave took the place the Teaser had declined, and the way he "corraled" Sam Sutter's "ducats," was equaled only by the way his own were occasionally "stampeded" by his daring adversary.

Bummer Boggs hung round the board with greedy delight. It seemed to do him "a power of good" to witness a big haul, no matter who the winner or who the loser.

Indeed, this impartiality was not altogether without reason. Whenever a noteworthy stake

was made, the winner called for the drinks, of which Bummer Boggs came in for his share.

By midnight Moran was pretty well under the influence of liquor, though not so much as he would have been, had not the whisky been in a measure neutralized by his strong excitement.

However, he was glad to avail himself of the fraternal proffer of Bummer Boggs, who seemed to bid defiance to all the powers of King Alcohol.

"Pard," said the old hummer, taking him by the arm, "thar's a pair of us, fur I'm happier'n a b'iled owl myself to-night. But you hain't got my underpinnin', which it don't stan' to reason as you would have, bein's as you hain't fit the battles what I have with ole Tanglefoot."

"But one good turn deserves another. You've filled me up, an' made me happy, an' I'll stan' by ye, pard, while wood grows an' water runs! I'll back ye off to bed, an' I'll keep the flies off o' ye while ye sleep, ef so be it'll do ye any good."

"You tie to Bummer Boggs, ole man, fur I don't mind lettin' on as how he's took a sneakin' notion to ye. You're the whitest man in this hyar camp, an' that's a fact. You set 'em up like a gentleman, an' no questions asked. When ye want a lift, I say, call on Bummer Boggs. He's a pore ole shote, we will allow, but he's solid, what thar is of him, from the ground up."

"Whoop! whoop! Set 'em up in the other alley! Fur we won't go home till mornin'—we won't go home till mornin'—Stiddy! stiddy, ole man! Say, pard—this hyar's gee-lorious, eh?"

Nothing could be freer from guile than old Bummer Boggs seemed to be.

Joe Moran was not fool enough to take much stock in the disinterestedness of his friendship, but he seemed to have but one thought—his whisky, and he would probably stand by the one who supplied that need most fully.

He certainly saw Moran home, and put him to bed as comfortably as any one could have done.

When he came to leave him, he fumbled about the door for some time, until Moran called out with drunken impatience:

"What the deuce is the matter with you? Why don't you cl'ar out, an' lemme alone?"

Then, in an equally fuddled state, to all appearances, Bummer Boggs replied, holding on to the door:

"Say, ole man, hyar's a poser."

"Wha's a poser?"

"Why, this hyar. Ef I lock the door on the inside, how'll I git out?—an' ef I locks it on the outside, how'll you git out? Hic! That'll take some figerin', I reckon."

"You cl'ar out, you blasted fool, an' I'll lock the door myself, ef I want it locked."

"Waal, now, that shows what it is to have a head on yer shoulders. Anybody'd orter see that. You locks it yerself, an' then you climbs in through the winder, an' takes the key in with yer. Waal, ye see, I don't have no sich bother. It's all outdoors over to our house. I'm a great hand fur ventilation. I've left the hull front o' the house out—"

"Consarn your ugly pictur'! ef you don't cl'ar out o' that, I'll ventilate your hide with a hole what ye can't stop up with an ole rag."

And Moran fell to fumbling for his revolver.

"Don't trouble yerself, ole man," returned Boggs, moving off. "So long! I'll see ye later."

Joe Moran had enough liquor in him so that he had forgotten all about his fears of the early evening.

He muttered something to himself, in which the word *fool* and a profane qualifier were the only intelligible articulations, and so dropped off to sleep, quite unmindful of the door, which was left unlocked.

But while he slept, his mind resumed the earlier line of thought, and ran into a horrible nightmare.

It began with his interview with Beth, and he lived over again those wild alternations of emotion, the tides of his soul ebbing and flowing in answer to her smiles.

Then came the shock of his return home, only varied, as dreams distort the events of our waking life.

Instead of finding that paper, he was confronted on the threshold by his old partner—not an avenging Nemesis arisen from his grave to denounce his murderer, but the Bob Cady of old, when, half-mad with the rush of feeling with which he saw success at last crowning his long years of suspense, he announced his great discovery, unsuspecting of the cupidity that was turning his listening partner into a merciless fiend.

Bob called to him, almost in the very words he had used that night:

"Hooray! hooray! I've struck it at last! Rich?—my God! thar ain't no countin' of it! It's one o' the mines what ye read about. I tell ye, it's as straight as a string."

In a flash, as is common in dreams, the scene changed, and the dreamer was back again in that fatal shanty.

But he had not the unaccusing conscience with which he had awaked before to listen to his partner's announcement.

Now his soul was burdened with the unspeakable horror of a murderer.

Never again would he look upon Bob Cady or

his counterfeit presentment, without being overpowered by an unmanly cowardice, the agony of which cannot be portrayed in words.

Now he was awake, and sitting up in his bunk, clinging to his bed-clothes as if to hide himself behind them, yet unable to withdraw his horrified gaze from the specter that fascinated him. He could only stare with starting eyeballs and chattering teeth, while every nerve quivered, and a clammy ooze issued from every pore.

The room was dark. Outside, the night was so overcast that the window was scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding gloom.

He could hear the wind sighing dismally through the pines, and from time to time a fitful gust of cold air swept over him, like a breath from the grave.

Over there in the darkest corner, he could dimly discern a figure of spectral white, which, as nearly as he could make them out, had the lineaments of his dead partner.

But it moved with a ceaseless changeableness impossible to anything of substantial constitution. Now it seemed to dwindle away, until it looked as if it were sinking through the floor, and anon it loomed to proportions limited only by the height of the ceiling.

Even more unnerving were the cries to which it gave utterance.

Now it was:

"Joe! Joe! Oh, my God! I'm a dead man!"

Anon it was:

"Murder! murder! Help! oh, help!"

Then came hoarse, panting curses, as of a man engaged in a life-and-death struggle.

But these cries were confined to no particular locality. They seemed to come from constantly shifting points about the room, as if the man who gave utterance to them were moving about, now here, now yonder.

The cry of "murder!" was shrieked into the ear of the quailing listener. The hoarse rattle of strangulation came from the floor. A savage curse set the air quiver in the middle of the room, at about the height of a man's head. A groan, a stifled cry of anguish, proceeded from under the bunk.

Meanwhile, these sounds of human contention were attended by all of the accompaniments of a terrific struggle.

A box which, standing on one end, had a board nailed up one side of it at an angle, so as to form a seat that was a fair substitute for a chair, went spinning across the room, as if struck by a flying foot.

A rude table, which was a luxury not known in every mining shanty, was overturned with a crash.

Objects that hung against the wall were swept down.

Finally came a blinding flash, and the room rung with an explosion like that of a pistol, upon which the very air seemed to burst into shrieks so weird, so appalling, that the listener's hair rose on end, while his eyes seemed about to start from their sockets.

The door was thrown open, and banged to again with such violence as to shake the house to its foundations, while the window rattled as if it were being torn from its casement, as the spectral form sped through it, out into the darkness of the night.

Then, as if by magic, the silence of death succeeded the uncanny commotion.

With a shriek of horror Joe Moran threw himself back upon his bunk, covering his head with the bed-clothes.

CHAPTER XV.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

MEANWHILE Six-foot Si was passing through a fiery ordeal.

He had come here to kill Joe Moran, that he might spare the sweetheart of his murdered partner the horror of imbuing her hands in blood, in her frenzied quest of revenge, only to find her on terms of seeming tender intimacy with the murderer!

Granted that, deceived by his assumed name, she did not know him as Joe Moran. But what was this monstrous inconstancy?

He had last seen her like one turned to stone with despair, yet here she was, scarcely a week later, laughing and chatting, and practicing all the arts of a coquette!

This it was—the fall of his idol—that had wrung that cry from the honest breast of Six-foot Si, when he cast himself upon his bed and appealed to Heaven against the evidence of his eyes.

Well, if this was woman, and the one he had come to believe the paragon of her sex had proved to be as unreliable as the least trustworthy, what was to be done about it?

Could he leave her in her ignorance to go on and perhaps marry Joe Moran?

That seemed to him a horror too great for contemplation.

But what would be the effect of telling her who he was?

Would she turn from him in horror, or would her love prevail against her hate?

In the former event, what would she do?

He recalled an incident somewhat similar, of a bride who, on the eve of her marriage, discov-

ered that the man she was about to marry had killed her brother in a duel. Her solution of this difficulty had been suicide.

Would Beth Crawford kill herself? He recalled her desperation as manifested at Mulligan's Bend, with a shudder. Dared he run the risk of leading her into such a dilemma?

On the other hand, suppose her love for Moran overbore every other consideration. What would be her subsequent life with him, with Bob Cady's reproachful specter ever rising between them?

Six-foot Si asked himself whether he had the right to open her eyes, if indeed she was deceived, with such pitfalls whichever way she turned.

There was one other way out of this perplexing situation—to carry out the purpose which had brought him here—to force Moran into one of those quarrels which are so easy in any community where the recognized appeal is to the revolver, and kill him.

"She'll be mighty cut up, losin' two o' 'em so clos't together," reflected Six-foot Si. "But that's better than livin' with the murderer of the first, bekknownst or unbeknownst."

After declining the "quiet game of draw," Si had left the Bucking Burro, to wander alone out in the night, and fight over this terrible battle.

As if by no will of his own, his feet bore him in the direction of Beth Crawford's shanty. All was dark, as if she had gone to bed.

He was tempted to creep up to the shanty, and listen for some sound of her. But it was yet early evening. She might be sitting in the dark. If she saw him approaching stealthily, she would be frightened.

Tears came into his eyes, so deeply was he moved at the mere thought, not clearly defined, but only half recognized, of what might have been; had it been possible for him to listen for her footstep or the sound of her breathing without the intercepting shadows of Bob Cady and Joe Moran.

While he stood afar off and gazed at that shanty, it seemed as if his heart would burst with the pain that swelled it.

Never before had he felt toward any woman as now toward this. They had been strangers, but this one he seemed to have known always, as he had known his mother, or the sister who had died years ago. This one seemed to belong to him—to be a part of himself.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should do anything for her, make any sacrifice, if necessary to her well-being. The thought of a reward never occurred to him. So much in awe of her did he stand, that he had not yet reached the lover's desire for appropriation.

But in the pain of that vigil the true nature of his feelings were revealed to him.

With this knowledge came a sort of frenzy. Joe Moran, the murderer, a man who had forfeited every claim to human consideration, stood between him and happiness!

"Why couldn't she come to me?" he cried, with a fierce sense of injustice. "I'd worship her! She should never know a day of sorrow."

But then came a sense of unworthiness. "I'm a healthy galoot fur the like of her!" he muttered. "What 'u'd she see in me, I want to know?"

But now it seemed to him worse than ever that Joe Moran should get her.

With clinched hand, set teeth and blazing eyes, he muttered, hoarsely:

"Never! never! I'll kill him, curse him!" He was in this mood when the nightly revel came to a close, and the saloons disgorged their roistering hordes into the street.

He saw Joe Moran come out supported by Bummer Boggs, and followed them to Moran's shanty, skulking after them in the shadows like any murderer.

Never before had Six-foot Si's brain been in such a whirl of ferocious excitement as now. Never before had he drawn his bowie from its sheath with so unsteady a hand. Never had he lusted for human blood so like a wild beast or a madman.

"I'll kill him—curse him, I'll kill him!" kept surging through his brain.

Crouching under the wall of a shanty, he was where he heard the parting dialogue between Bummer Boggs and his intended victim.

Having settled the question of the key to his satisfaction, Boggs went his way. But had he seen the crouching figure near which he passed, it probably would have made some change in his plans.

When he was out of hearing, Six-foot Si crept nearer to Joe Moran's shanty, until he could hear the snoring of the inebriate.

There he lay at his mercy. He might creep in, strike the fatal blow, and escape, no man ever rising up as his accuser.

But now a change was coming over Six-foot Si. For a time he had been scarcely responsible for his actions, but with reflection came other considerations. Now the character of the man began to assert itself against the mad rush of passion.

At last his head sunk upon his breast, as he muttered:

"No! no! I can't do that! It would be murder! It is because I hate him so! I hate him! I hate him!"

The words were hissed between his set teeth, but Joe Moran was safe.

Six-foot Si might have killed him, with only the formal show of fairness which the elastic law of that semi-barbarous community demands, to save Beth Crawford from a lifetime of remorse, but there was no danger of his killing him from purely personal animosity. Six-foot Si was no murderer.

"For her sake I would do it, and more," he reflected. "But that's past now. I shouldn't be doin' it for her."

So shaken by emotion that he staggered like a drunken man, he crept from the vicinity of this the greatest temptation of his life.

What took him toward Beth's shanty? It was a sort of remorse. He felt as if he had deserted her cause, had incapacitated himself for serving her.

For he knew not how long he stood gazing at the rude structure which held her. Every sound of stirring life in the camp died out. The last hiccoughing bacchanal, interrupting his song at some high note with a howl that would have done credit to a hungry coyote, had stumbled across the threshold of his shanty, and got into his bunk with his boots on. Silence and sleep brooded over the place but now a veritable pandemonium.

But what was this that caused the watcher to start, to straighten his bowed figure, to stare in fixed amazement?

All were not asleep. Something was moving over there at Beth Crawford's shanty. But what? Was it possible? Could his eyes deceive him?

The door opened noiselessly. A figure crept forth. The door was closed again. A man had come from the house which should be tenanted only by the woman he loved.

Never before had such a blow fallen upon this strong nature. He had seen her in love, as he supposed, with the murderer of her dead betrothed, and the horror of it had left him dumb. But this—this was without a name!

He stood like one turned to stone, while the figure crept past him. He was conscious of no thought, no emotion of any kind. Everything was a dead blank.

But, when the figure had gone by, out of that dead stillness rose a storm compared with which his hatred of Joe Moran an hour ago was as nothing.

Once more he drew his bowie, and crept after the figure stealing through the night.

There was no danger of a reconsideration of his purpose now. He meant to kill *this* man, whoever he might be, but he must know him first.

It was the lover, seeking material for future self-torture, that led him to postpone the execution of his revenge. He must know the face of the man who had stabbed him in the most vulnerable part—"struck him whar he lived!"

Never Thug crept after the victim of his strangling cord more ruthlessly than did this man who had just discriminated between an act for the sake of another, and one prompted by personal malice.

What was his further surprise to see this skulking figure join another, as if by appointment, which proved to be Bummer Boggs? With what bewilderment did he listen to the following dialogue:

"Well?"
"He's fixed, mum, as solid as a church. 'Most too solid! It'll take an earthquake to wake him up."

"He has been drinking?"
"He's been swimmin' in it."

The other uttered an ejaculation of disgust, and then went on:

"You are ready to carry out your plan?"
"You bet! The show will be A 1; but I tell you the audience is what's like to git us."

"Do your part, and I will take care of the rest."

"Whenever you give the word, the curtain will raise."

Then these two moved off in the direction of Joe Moran's shanty, and Six-foot Si followed, almost stupidly.

The man—as he supposed—whom he had been following, spoke with the voice of Beth Crawford!

"A fool! a blasted fool!" muttered Six-foot Si, in disgusted self-deprecation. "More'n that, an infernal scoundrel! I'd orter be dragged through a horse-pond, an' that's a fact!"

However, his heart gave a bound of relief. So great was the reaction, that he felt giddy, as with intoxication.

Though his head spun round with bewilderment, one thing was sure—the woman he loved was safe!

But what was the meaning of her disguise? and why this meeting with Bummer Boggs? Where were they going? What were they about to do?

He saw them creep stealthily up to Joe Moran's shanty, and listen at the door and window.

"He is sleeping soundly," said Beth.

"That's money in my pocket," answered Bummer Boggs. "Ef he wakes up on me, thar'll be the biggest kind of a row."

"There is no need of waking him. Take off your shoes."

"You bet!" said Boggs, easily stepping out of the brogans he wore.

"On reflection, I will go in with you," declared Beth, quietly.

"Too many cooks spoils the broth," quoted Boggs.

"It will be my loss, then."

Thereupon both crept into the shanty, where they were engaged—at what, Si could not guess—for what seemed to his anxiety an interminable time.

The steady, rhythmic snoring of the inebriated sleeper, heard even where Six-foot Si lay secreted, showed that they did not disturb him.

An effort was made to raise the window, but it squeaked so loud that this was apparently abandoned.

After an interval, the two reappeared.

"That winder was enough to wake the dead," said Bummer Boggs. "Ef we're on the outside, we kin skip, an' try our luck another time; but ef we was inside when he dropped to us, we'd be like to hyear somethin' drop before we got out o' thar."

"Do a little less talking, if you please, and try the window cautiously from the outside."

Boggs did as he was bidden, and though the window protested loudly, he proceeded with such caution as not to rouse the sleeper.

Then he and Beth were for some time engaged in fixing something which Si could not see.

"Now all is in readiness?" asked Beth, at last.

"Ready, boss!" replied Boggs, forgetful, in his enthusiasm, of her sex.

"Try it."

In the interval of silence that followed, Six-foot Si heard something inside the shanty move.

"How's that?" queried Boggs, with satisfaction.

"You are sure that everything will come away?" asked Beth, anxiously. "There must not be the slightest trace, or all will be spoiled."

"Ma'am," replied Boggs, "the Great Wizard o' the East use to say as he could go it blind when Migglesie had sot up the pins."

"Very well. Now the light. I am more doubtful of that than of anything else."

"Rest easy, mum. That's the easiest part of all."

"Let me see how it operates."

Boggs fumbled among his clothes for a moment, and then Si caught a fleeting glimpse of a dim light, which shot across the shanty wall, and then disappeared inside.

"That may do," murmured Beth, a little doubtfully.

"It don't look like nothin', mum, when ye know the trick," said Boggs, "but ef it kin git away with a crowd o' folks what's in their senses, I reckon Joe Moran won't stop to look into it too close, when he feels the cold shivers runnin' up an' down his back."

"Do your best," concluded Beth, without passing any final opinion. "And remember that you will be amply rewarded if you succeed."

"I'm goin' my pile on this hyar," declared Boggs, confidently.

Beth then went round to the door, while Boggs remained at the window.

"When ye're ready, let 'er go!" he whispered.

"Now!" responded Beth—"and may God help us to strike terror to his black soul!"

Then began the performance which filled Joe Moran with superstitious fears, and though Six-foot Si knew that it was but the tricks of ordinary conjuring, with ventriloquism and so-called "wire-pulling," it was so well done as to be terribly realistic even to him.

When Joe Moran's shriek of terror told them of their success Beth and Bummer Boggs moved hastily away from the shanty, and Six-foot Si also increased his distance from it, to guard against discovery if the murderer should recover himself sufficiently to make an investigation.

After an interval of deathlike silence, the door was suddenly burst open, and Joe Moran rushed forth in a frenzy of fear.

Straight through the camp he ran, as if pursued by furies.

"He is going for you!" cried Beth, with a woman's quick divination. "Run! run! He must not find you away from your cave, or it will rouse his suspicions, and all our efforts will be lost."

"I know a cut-off! I'll beat him—"

"Run! run!"
And away sped Bummer Boggs as no bummer ever ran before.

Beth stood irresolute for some time, and then, as if with a sudden inspiration, she ran to the shanty Moran had vacated in such a hurry.

Si heard her moving about inside, as if setting furniture to rights, and presently she came out and secreted herself at a safe distance, evidently to await the issue of the race.

The dead silence of the camp showed that no one had been disturbed by sounds that were all too common in that camp.

A single pistol-shot could fetch no one out of bed in Bloody Run. If any one was roused by it, he probably lay and listened for a moment, and hearing nothing further to indicate that a row was in progress, turned over and went to sleep again.

Crouching where he could see the conclusion of this adventure, Six-foot Si was breathing more easily than he had done since he entered the camp, and saying to himself:

"Thank God! thank God!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

CROUCHING and cowering under the blankets, Joe Moran could not long endure the silence and awful sense of desolation that followed the pandemonium that had reigned in his shanty but a moment before, and suddenly leaping from his bunk, he rushed, all undressed as he was, out into the night, fleeing as Bob Cady had fled on that night of horror.

Where should he go?—where find the security of companionship?

All the camp was asleep. The last howling inebriate had sunk into unconsciousness an hour, maybe two hours, ago.

But he did not think of these. The last impression on his mind before he sunk to sleep recurred to him now, in that vague way which gives a blind impulse to the mind when, in the mad whirl of thought, nothing stands out in definite outlines.

In his extremity he remembered Bummer Boggs, and felt that he alone could succor him.

He knew where the old bummer "turned in" of nights, having passed the place while hunting Beth Crawford's footsteps among the crags.

Now he rushed blindly through the night toward this haven of security.

He found the spot, a shallow cavern in the face of the cliff, just sufficient to protect the occupant from the rain.

There lay Bummer Boggs, snoring away in a most remarkable manner. If he was in a nightmare, he must have dreamed that he was suffocating. Certainly he gasped and snorted as if the fabled incubus were seated astride of his chest.

He did not rouse until Joe Moran seized him with both hands, and dragged him from his shake-down of mountain moss, shrieking:

"Help! help! Rouse out o' hyar, ole man! Fur God's sake, wake up!"

"Eh? What? Hands off, thar! Who in Cain air you? What d'ye want o' me? Hands off, I say!"

And with the spluttering of a pretty badly frightened old toper, Bummer Boggs tore himself free from the clinging hands of his unseasonable visitor, and straightway admonished him to greater circumspection by the deadly click click! of his ready revolver.

"Now then, stand an' deliver!" he cried, "ur I'll bore ye, whoever ye be, with a gimblet what makes a hole bigger'n ary stock-bit you ever see!"

"Hold on!" gasped Moran, sinking with exhaustion upon the litter which served the old man much as if he had had four legs instead of two. "I hain't come to do ye no harm."

"Who be ye, then? An' what do ye want, this time o' night?"

"Moran—Joe Moran!" panted the fugitive, forgetful of his incognito.

"Moran?" repeated Boggs, suspiciously. "Who's Joe Moran?"

Then, drawing nearer, and seeming to recognize his visitor as he peered at him through the darkness, he went on:

"Oh, is that you, Sutter, ole boy? What in Cain's got into ye, anyway? Maggots, eh? Snakes an' tarant'lers? Waal, I've been that way myself."

And putting up his revolver, he seemed to prepare to take matters quite coolly.

"They must 'a' stirred ye up right lively, to rout ye out in this hyar fix," he went on. "But jest you keep yer shirt on, ole man, an' we'll pull ye through yit. I 'lowed as you was goin' it purty steep last night, bein' as you hain't got my underpinnin'. But jest you leave the thing to me. I've been thar myself, an' I know how to taper ye off so's them things'll stay put, when we git 'em once planted."

"Jest now, ef you'll snuggle up in this ole raglan, I'll go back to your shanty, an' git somethin' to put on to ye. You're wringin' wet, ain't ye? Waal, that won't do ye no hurt."

Here was an explanation of the scenes through which he had passed which had not occurred to Joe Moran. The old bummer seemed to take it so as a matter of course, that it arrested his attention.

Could it all be a figment of a distempered imagination? He had been drinking pretty steadily ever since the fatal act that had filled his nights with horror and his days with fear.

He had dreamed dreams as terrible, but had not been so impressed by them as by this waking experience.

"I was wide awake," he kept repeating to himself. "I saw it! It was an actual fact."

But if this was an attack of delirium tremens, then the evidence of his senses was worthless.

"You jest stay hyar, quiet," said the old bummer, "an' I'll be back in a jiffy."

"Don't leave me!" pleaded Moran, as his friend prepared to go.

"Thar ain't nothin' hyar to touch ye, ole man."

"I'll go back with you."

"Oh, waal, that's better yet. Most chaps in your fix is afeard, but I always 'lowed as you had the sand, ever sence I fu'st clapped my peepers on ye."

"Do you 'low as I've got the tremers?" asked Moran.

"Waal, ole man, ef you hain't, what air you a-doin' out hyar in yer underclo's this time o' night? What do you 'low as you come hyar fur, anyway?"

Moran hesitated. Should he take this old fellow into his confidence? But then, everybody knew who he was, and what he had done. After that, what was there to hide?

"I believe that the devil has got into that shanty o' mine," he said.

"O' course he has," was Bummer Boggs's ready acquiescence. "But we'll fix that all right in a day or two. I've been thar myself, I tell ye, an' I've come round so's thar ain't a much stiddier ole chap on his pins than I be now."

"But this was so real. I saw it all."

"O' course ye did, an' hysared it too, I reckon. Why, bless yer sweet soul! thar ain't nothin' on this hyar airth, nor down below, I reckon, what I hain't hysared an' seen, one time an' another. I've been thar more'n once, an' don't you furgit it!"

"But the very furniture was tumbled about the room. That couldn't move, if it was all my imagination."

"Waal, that jest depends," said the old bummer. "Ef you hain't been cavortin' around thar all by yerself, I 'low you'll find things all right when you git back."

Joe Moran shuddered, as a new recollection came to his mind—the paper warning him to "beware of Bob Cady!" That was real. He had put it in his breeches pocket.

"No, no," he reflected, "this hyar ain't no delirium-tremens. I hain't a single symptom of it. My head's as clear as a bell."

However, he rose, and accompanied Boggs back to his shanty.

The door stood wide open, and his blankets lay in the middle of the floor. Otherwise, everything was in perfect order.

"You see," said Boggs. "We might take a lesson from them fellers. They allers straighten things around ag'in, after they've had their high ole jinks."

Joe Moran looked about warily.

"It's all right, ain't it?" asked Boggs.

Without reply, Joe went to his breeches, and thrust his hand into the pocket for the warning paper.

He failed to find what he expected. Then he searched through all his clothes, with the same unsatisfactory result.

With a strange chill running up and down his back, he set to hunting in every nook and cranny in the shanty, while old Boggs looked on curiously.

Suddenly he gave up the search, and sat down.

"Lost somethin'?" asked the old man.

"No," replied Moran, in a husky voice. "I've found somethin'."

Boggs did not press the matter. He seemed to set it down to the "tremers."

Joe Moran was a man of iron nerve, but this last discovery was a greater shock, if possible, than all that had gone before.

Was he going insane, or was he the subject of supernatural visitation?

That paper had seemed to warn him of an earthly enemy. Must he prepare to cope with one returned from the other world?

He was positive that he had put the paper in his pocket. But then, he had had the same evidence of the movement of the furniture. Had it been an illusion from first to last?

For a time he was stunned with an overpowering sense of helplessness, but gradually the animal pugnacity of his nature began to assert itself.

"Man or devil," he muttered, between his set teeth, "I'll tackle him, ef he gives me a show!"

But it was one thing to meet this invisible enemy alone, and quite another to have some one of undoubted earthliness at hand with whose senses to check off one's own.

"What'll you take to stay hyar with me?" he asked of Bummer Boggs.

"O' nights?" queried the bummer, as if weighing in his mind the value of his services on extraordinary occasions.

"Yes, o' nights."

"Waal, pard, it ain't as if I was a-lettin' of myself out to a stranger, so I'll draw it as mild as I kin."

"Don't you lose nothin' on my account," interposed Moran, doggedly. "I'm able to pay you whatever you think you're worth."

"Waal, you've treated me as white as ary gent I ever met, an' I was allowin' as I'd leave it to you. You give me a place fur to bunk

down hyar on the floor—it can't be no wo'se'n I'm used to when I'm to hum—an' ef now an' ag'in you happen to have a mite o' spare change what you'd jest as lieve blow in whar it 'u'd do a power o' good, why, you drops it, an' we don't say no more about it."

Nothing could be fairer than this, nor better calculated to inspire confidence.

Migglesie was playing the shrewd old bummer to the life.

Joe Moran threw him a blanket without further words, and he said:

"Thankee!"

Then they "turned in" and though Moran slept none, his companion fell to snoring lustily, almost as soon as he was in position to do so.

Nothing further occurred in the interval before daylight came to banish all uncanny things and to restore to Joe Moran some of his wonted pluck.

But Joe was not the only one to pass a sleepless night that night.

Beth Crawford returned to her shanty, and walked the floor for a long time in savage exultation.

"It has begun!" she cried, striking her hands together. "Now I will push him to the verge of suicide. But he shall not escape me, even that way. My hand must strike the blow that hurls him to endless torture!"

Nothing could be more unwomanly than this savage lust for revenge, but the shock she had sustained after long years of dreary suspense and that hope deferred which makes the heart sick, had driven Beth Crawford to that borderland of insanity where she could scarcely be held accountable.

In his shanty, Six-foot Si sat by the open window, trying to make out the future.

He now saw the situation as it was. He was no longer tortured by doubts of Beth. But what was he to do?

Suppose Beth had changed her purpose, and did not now mean to kill Moran? It might be that she hoped to drive him to suicide, by playing upon his guilty fears.

This looked to Si quite different from deliberate murder. He was not so sure that this prospect justified him in carrying out the plan with which he had come to Bloody Run.

He finally concluded to wait, and to be guided by Beth's action as it developed.

"I'll watch her," he said to himself, "an' ef I see that she's gittin' desperate because things ain't workin' to her likin', then maybe I'll step in ag'in, an' wind the thing up with a round turn."

With this off his mind, he fell to speculating in an altogether pleasanter vein.

No one now stood between him and the woman he loved. To be sure, there was the memory of Bob Cady, but time heals many wounds, and Beth Crawford was just on the threshold of life.

But the possibilities that this course of reasoning opened up overpowered him, and casting himself on his bunk, face downward, he struggled with the wild hopes that surged in his soul.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HAUNTED MAN.

As so often happens after a night of sleeplessness, Joe Moran's quivering nerves were soothed by the singing of the birds, and he was enabled to drop into a brief period of unconsciousness.

But ere long his sleep was invaded by horrible visions, and he woke with a start, dripping with icy perspiration.

"I'm all broke up," he complained to Bummer Boggs, who was industriously whittling the end of a plug of tobacco and crumbling it in his palm, while he looked meditatively into the black bowl of a short clay pipe which he held between his knees.

"Pard," was the reply, "I'm a mite shaky myself. I was 'lowin' to take the curse off a bit, till you woke up, by a quiet pull at this hyar pipe what I found up you on the chimbley shelf. Ef so be you're a-wantin' of it"—and as he made this tender Bummer Boggs put on a look of long-suffering martyrdom—"don't be barshful out o' politeness."

And he extended the pipe just filled to his patron.

Joe Moran started upright in bed, staring at the pipe.

"Eh! whar did you git that thar?" he demanded, with an oath.

"Up yon, on the chimbley shelf," repeated Boggs, pointing over the fireplace. "It was poked in back o' them thar boots, but I nosed 'er out. I didn't 'low it was no harm, boss, bein' as you was asleep, an' couldn't be usin' of it nohow."

"Use it," echoed Moran, with a shudder. "Take that thing out o' hyar, curse you! or I'll mop the floor with both you an' it."

"Can't I keep 'er, boss, ef you don't want 'er?" asked the bummer, looking at the pipe much as if it were an abused friend.

For answer, Joe Moran sprang out of bed, snatched the offending pipe from the bummer's hand, and dashed it to fragments on the hearthstone.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" ejaculated Boggs, gazing mournfully at the wreck. "What's the row

with the pipe? I hain't had a decent pull fur a dog's age, an' I was reckonin'—"

"Git out o' hyar! Vamose! Slope!" shouted Moran, advancing wrathfully upon the astonished bummer.

Boggs "skipped" with commendable agility, but he stopped outside, and looked in through the door at his inhospitable host.

"Waal, that's all right," he said, with an air of wondering submission. "Every man knows his own business best. Ef you're done with me, I'll git, an' won't charge ye nothin' fur this half-day's work. I reckon the lodgin'll make that squar'."

"Hold on," said Moran, recovering his self-possession. "Come back in hyar, you blamed ole fool. Don't you pay no attention to me. I ain't a-feelin' well. O' course I want you to stay right along, an' I'll make it right with you, too."

"Jest as you say, boss," acquiesced Boggs, slouching back into the shanty.

The explanation of this scene is, that Bob Cady was in the habit of smoking just such a little black pipe, filling it with plug tobacco, whittled and crumbled in his palm.

The pipe, as he had left it, and a partly-used plug, had been found by Beth in her visit to the shanty where he had lived with his pard before the demon of cupidity had turned the latter into his most implacable foe.

Joe Moran's first thought was, that the specter of the night before had left this material memento, to haunt him. But a moment's reflection on Boggs's statement of where he had found it, led him to think that it had been left by the previous tenant, since nothing is more common than a little black pipe.

"Waal, boss," proposed Boggs, with an innocent air, "what next? I reckon we both want to brace up a bit."

Moran, who felt the need of something to tone up his shaky nerves even more than Boggs did, reached for a black bottle that graced the mantel-shelf.

But Boggs interposed quickly:

"No go, pard. I made bold to investigate that thar shortage while you was a-snoozin'."

"Go an' git it filled, then," ordered Moran.

"With the greatest pleasure in life!" cried the bummer, receiving the bottle and some money which his patron handed him, with an eagerness which showed that his mouth was watering in advance.

He returned betimes with the bottle nearly full, which showed that he had taken not more than a pull or two on the way.

Joe drank eagerly and deep, while the bummer watched him as if he grudged every drop.

"He'll suck the bottom through!" he murmured, just loud enough for Moran to hear, ending with a sigh of resignation.

His patron passed the bottle in disgust.

Joe then scanned himself in a three-cornered bit of looking-glass which was nailed against the wall, to be used for shaving.

"I'm a sweet specimen fur to have Miss Falmouth see me!" he muttered, frowning at his haggard face and bloodshot eyes. "She'll think I've been on a three-weeks' drunk!"

There was no help for his appearance, but before he went to meet her, by the appointment of the day before, he braced his nerves repeatedly at the bottle.

Beth received him without seeming to notice that his movements were more uncertain than usual. She herself was pale, but so bad she been ever within his knowledge of her. Her manner indicated no abatement of her usual spirits.

She went with him to the general store of the camp, and bargained for a revolver not much smaller than the one Joe himself carried, and for an amount of ammunition that made the thrifty Hebrew's eyes blink with surprise as well as gratification.

Out among the crags, Joe Moran was astonished at her aptness. There was none of a woman's dallying over the thing. From the outset, she practiced the most approved way of handling the weapon, with a view to quickness of execution.

"You go at it as if you was goin' to make a business of it," observed Joe, admiringly.

"Who knows?" she responded. "One of these days it may serve my purpose."

"Do you mean to say that you could bring yourself to kill a man?"

"If I hated him!" she replied, her voice, in spite of her, assuming a husky intensity.

Joe laughed, a little uneasily.

"I didn't 'low you had it in ye. I hope you won't never git after me."

"That would be an ungrateful return for your kindness, wouldn't it?"

"Don't mention it!"

So thoughtlessly he trod on the brink of the precipice.

To Six-foot Si, who watched these rendezvous, this cold-blooded preparation was terrible. He shuddered as he looked at Beth. What manner of woman was she, so different from his idea of her sex?

But he was always ready with an excuse for her. She had had "a pill what it was hard fur human natur' to swaller."

So he waited, while Beth acquired a proficiency with the revolver that astonished both him and her instructor.

The fact was that, even when not with Joe Moran, she practiced nearly all day, with just enough rest so that her muscles might not be overstrained.

Meanwhile, Six-foot Si had another matter to look after.

Another member of Hank Budlong's band found his way to Bloody Run, and recognized Joe Moran.

Si "spotted" him the moment he set his foot in the camp, and never lost sight of him again until he held him a captive.

But his "asylum" was getting to be quite an institution. These men needed so much attention, if they were to be properly cared for, that it took too much of his time away from Bloody Run.

"If Birdsall would only put in an appearance now," he reflected, looking for some sign of the usual occupant of the cavern. "I wonder what keeps him away so long?"

In his absence, could he trust another?

He thought the matter over, and finally went to Dandy Dave.

"Look a-hyar, pard," he said, "I hain't interfered with your runnin' o' this hyar camp, as you said I might—"

"An' I stand by it," interposed Dave, quickly. "Anything you say will go through with a rush."

"I'm obleeged to ye, pard. But I don't want to play none o' the keerds out o' your hand."

"Anything else. Money—"

"Hold hard, thar! I ain't no beggar."

"Then lead off to yer own likin'." I'll foller yer suit ef I've got the keerds in my hand, or kin steal 'em out o' the deck."

"What I want is jest this—a man what is deaf, dumb, an' blind—what can't hear nothin' an' don't know nothin' but to do jest what you tell him to do."

"I kin put my hand on the galoot ye want, to a T. It's Dimijohn."

"Dimijohn!" repeated Si. "That won't do. I don't want no chap with no sich handle as that."

"Oh, he's straight as a string," was Dave's assurance. "He's the oddest Dick you ever see. You couldn't git him to touch a drop to save his life. You kin tie to him, boss, ef that's all ye want."

"Then what's he doin' with such a handle?"

"Why, ye see, he's an out-an'-out dummy, an' his name is John. So the boys got to calling him Dummy John, an' it didn't take long to clip that to Dimijohn."

"An' he can't really hear nothin'?"

"He couldn't hear a cannon go off."

"An' he'll stand by the man that pays him?"

"He's the straightest feller you ever see about that. He's a reg'lar bull-dog when it comes to hangin' on fur the chap as flings him his meat."

"He's the man fur my money."

"You bet he is—"

"Hold on!" interposed Si, quickly. "Suppose the thing looks a mite crooked?"

"That won't trouble him none. He never asks no questions."

"An'—one pint more—is he on his muscle?"

"Waal, I should smile! Wait till you see him. He's got the nerve of a biffer bull."

"Good enough! Show him up, pard."

"He don't hang out at the Run, hyar, but he's right on top o' the deck fur all that. We kin git him in three hours. I run across him a year ago, playin' heeler to a friend o' mine."

Si and Dave were soon in the saddle, and away to a neighboring camp, where they found a man who was neither a dwarf nor a giant, but who had some of the qualities of both.

If his body could have been straightened out, he would have overtopped most men. As it was, having the physical development of a Hercules, he stood not more than five feet high.

He was really a deaf mute, but his blindness was of that most convenient sort, such that it was easy to "throw dust in his eyes," if it was only the proper kind of dust, when he would see nothing that his employer did not wish him to see.

He had a massive jaw, out of proportion with the slight development of the upper part of his head, giving him the appearance of an imbecile, but his little pink-like eyes twinkled so as to suggest that very little escaped his observation.

Here was a human machine, without conscience, and with just enough intelligence to carry out to the letter any work at which he was set.

Six-foot Si soon made his bargain with him by the use of signs, and took him away, without gratifying the evident curiosity of Dandy Dave.

Having installed him as jailer over his prisoners, Si returned to Bloody Run, to resume his watch over events there in progress.

Meanwhile, Bummer Boggs had not been idle.

From being Joe Moran's companion at night, he got to be his right-hand man on all occasions, and was in his company most of the time when Joe was not with Miss Falmouth.

Bummer Boggs seemed to have but one idea—whisky, and without any apparent motive beyond his own personal gratification, he fig-

uratively held the bottle to Moran's lips whenever there was the slightest occasion to have recourse to that deadener of a restless conscience.

By the use of his ventriloquial powers, he made the occasions very frequent, so that from the time Boggs undertook to help keep at bay the specters that haunted him, Moran was never entirely sober.

During the daytime Moran was comparatively free from these seeming supernatural visitations, though once in a while he fancied that he heard a light footfall just behind him, or felt a passing breath, spectral in its coldness.

These were purely imaginative, the result of the excitement which he was constantly under. But at night he had better cause for his fears.

He would wake out of a deep, lethargic sleep of sheer exhaustion, with Bob Cady's voice ringing in his ears.

There lay Bummer Boggs, snoring away like a trooper, while all else in the shanty was still and dark.

This was the beginning of a scene of harrowing torture, such that the half-crazed victim was not infrequently driven from his seemingly devil-possessed shanty, to seek relief out of doors, walking the street.

Never was there a more faithful friend, to all appearance, than Bummer Boggs, who, roused from sleep that was the envy of his patron, rose without protest at any hour of the night, and walked arm in arm with the haunted man, consoling him—and plying him with whisky!

On one of these occasions, Joe Moran was just congratulating himself on the respite he secured on quitting the shanty for the open street, and wondering how it would do to abandon altogether the ordinary form of human habitation, and seek Bummer Boggs's hole in the hill, when he descried a shadowy figure approaching, of such unfamiliar outline that he clutched Boggs in affright, believing that his persecution was about to take some new form.

"See! see!" he cried, pointing it out.

"Waal, thar is somethin'," admitted Boggs, stopping and gazing.

"It's gone!" quavered Moran, as the figure stopped short, and leaped out of sight into the shadows.

But then came a voice which they both recognized, calling:

"Who goes thar?"

"Why, it's Crocker!" exclaimed Moran, with infinite relief.

"Hallo, ole man!" was Boggs's salute. "You needn't go to dodgin' us. We ain't on the shoot."

Crocker then came forward, carrying a saddle and bridle on his shoulder, and this it was that had given him so startling an appearance.

"Is that you, pard?" cried Moran, with as much warmth as if it were a long-lost brother.

"You bet!"

"But whar air you comin' from?"

"I got belated comin' from Daisy Gulch, an' my hoss slipped an' sprained his knee. So hyar I be on foot. But what in Cain air you critters a-doin', playin' ghost out hyar at this time o' night?"

For Joe Moran's toilet was of the scantiest possible, though Bummer Boggs never took off anything, on going to bed, but his hat.

"Waal, ye see, I ain't a-feelin' very well," replied Joe, evasively.

Crocker looked a little curious, but accepted this explanation without pressing the matter, and shortly took his departure.

But he did not give it up so, for on the following day he got Joe Moran apart from Bummer Boggs, and began:

"Look a-hyar, Sutter! I'm yer solid friend. Don't you believe that?"

"I hain't no reason not to believe it," replied Moran, with a wondering look.

"Waal, ye kin gamble on it. I took a notion to you the fust day you struck this camp. Now, as between friend and friend, I want you to make a clean breast of it. What's the row with you, anyway?"

"The row with me?" repeated Moran, beginning to be disturbed.

"Joe," said Crocker, lowering his voice.

Moran gave a start, and turned pale.

"That's all right," was Crocker's reassurance.

"All the boys knows it, an' it don't gag nobody. So, as between man an' man, thar ain't no use in fightin' shy."

"What do you want?" asked Moran, not altogether trusting this fair seeming.

"I want to stand in with you," was the earnest reply. "I say, Sam—ef you like that better—I've had my eye on you fur the last few days, an' I've seen that you was a-losin' o' yer grip. You gittin' worse an' worse, an' you a-gittin' worse fast. Now, what is it?"

Joe Moran looked at the man who made this friendly proffer with a longing wistfulness. Dared he trust him? If he could, this man would be a stancher support than Bummer Boggs, who, in truth, helped him in nothing but to prove the virtues of corn-juice.

"Think it over," said Old-man Crocker. "You hain't knowed me very long. But when you git ready, you kin tie to me, bet yer sweet life!"

"I will!" cried Moran, seizing both his hands. "God knows I want a friend powerful bad!"

"I 'lowed ye did," acquiesced Crocker, "an' that's why I opened up."

His confidence once given, it seemed as if Moran could not unburden himself sufficiently.

In nothing does a criminal find such relief as in confession. The saying that murder will out has no doubt sprung largely from this tendency in crime-burdened men to betray themselves, spurred by this almost irresistible impulse.

Joe Moran poured forth into the ear of his confidant such a story as would have curdled the blood of any ordinary man.

But Old-man Crocker was far from being an ordinary man in this sense. What impressed him most was the supposed supernatural element in the narrative.

He was a man distinguished for hard common sense. He "took no stock" in the supernatural. The only question with him was, how could he explain what Joe had experienced on an entirely natural basis?

Was it all imaginary? Was it only the working of this man's conscience? Had whisky anything to do with it?

But Old-man Crocker knew the symptoms growing out of an over indulgence in liquor, and he decided at once that this was not the chief cause, though it might aggravate the trouble otherwise produced.

He cross-examined Moran as sharply as if he had been an attorney striving to break down his testimony, until he was familiar with every detail, and knew the time and order of occurrence of all. Then he said:

"Waal, I'll think it over. Jest you drive right ahead with Boggs, as if nothing had happened, an' you needn't let on to him or anybody else as I've took a hand."

Joe Moran could not find words to express his gratitude for this friendly intervention. Later he felt driven to seek further communion with Crocker, but the Old-man "stood him off," and treated him as coolly as if there was nothing between them.

But he was not neglecting the case. He had resolved to see one of those supernatural visitations. Unsuspected by Moran or Boggs, he spent the next few nights under Moran's window, with results to the narration of which we at once proceed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SPY.

THERE were very good grounds for Old-man Crocker's remarking the changed appearance of Joe Moran. In the few days he had enjoyed the protection of Bummer Boggs's companionship, he had been transformed from a man of unusual nerve to a veritable coward.

His face was ghastly in its pallor, his eyes wild with furtive watchfulness. He would start at the slightest unexpected sound, and continue to tremble for some time after he had discovered that there was no cause for alarm.

His imagination had been so played upon, that it was no longer necessary for his tormentor to resort to the grosser tricks of the wizard's art. At the slightest suggestion the conscience-haunted murderer would fancy he saw most horrible visions.

If Beth Crawford could have witnessed how effectually her purpose of revenge was being carried out, it is probable that her heart would have failed her.

But Miglesie had no conscience in the matter. As his success became more and more pronounced, he conceived an artist's pride in it, and kept adding to his performance, as his ingenuity suggested.

Beth saw the effect of this, as did everybody else, in Moran's changed appearance; but she had not the vivid realization she would have had, if she had seen him actually undergoing torture.

"This is but a beginning!" she kept saying to herself. "He will have all eternity to pay the penalty of his infamous treachery! But this foretaste I shall see, and take part in inflicting. This is my revenge!"

Each day she met Bummer Boggs for an interview in which he recounted what he had done during the preceding twenty-four hours.

It was terrible to witness the eagerness with which she listened to his graphic accounts, expressing in hoarse ejaculations her gratification as he mimicked his victim's distress.

These interviews were not without their effect. Beth's keen appreciation flattered her comedian. Each day he must have something new to tell her, on pain of seeing her interest wane.

The result was, that he spent the day in devising some variation of the one theme on which he had to harp, and played it out on Joe Moran's quivering heart-strings at night.

By practice, he acquired skill, too, as a narrator, and like many a story-teller since the world began—especially of that class who are the heroes of the exploits they detail—he did not scruple to embellish his account with any bright idea that happened to strike him in the course of his recital.

With this, the romancer's privilege, it was not difficult to present a report spicy enough for even Beth Crawford's greedy malignity, and indeed he succeeded so well, that she soon ceased

to be satisfied with receiving the gratification of her revenge thus at second hand.

"I must be a witness to this!" she cried, striking her hands together with a gesture of passionate impatience.

"The which?" ejaculated Bummer Boggs, rather disconcerted at this proposition.

"I must see it with my own eyes!" reiterated Beth, fairly stamping her foot, as a sort of frenzy of malice took possession of her. "I must see him writhe, and hear him gasp and pant in terror! Oh, if I could but kill him over and over again every day for a year, and every time by some new means of torture!"

Miglesie stared at her. He was not squeamish, as we know, but there was a point at which even he "drew the line." Such wolfish malignity in one of her sex was rather unexpected, to say the least of it.

"Waal, mum," he drawled slowly, "I will say as you hold over me a mite."

Beth understood him, but she shrugged her shoulders. It was nothing to her that she had at last found some shadowy indications of a conscience in him. She meant to force him to do her will; and for the rest, that was his affair.

"I shall be where I can see and hear to-night," she said, coolly.

"May I ask whar that'll be?" ventured Boggs.

"Under his window. You can leave it open, and, if you please, stand there, and give me warning if there is a likelihood of his approaching and discovering me."

"It'll be mighty resky, mum."

"Most things in this world that are worth anything, involve some risk to enjoy them."

"O' course you're playin' yer own game, mum."

And Boggs shook his head dubiously.

"And will not complain of the result, if you do your part faithfully," was Beth's assurance.

"I don't ask no more'n that, mum."

"Then be prepared to give me a treat to-night, at the usual hour."

"I have to wait till I'm sure that every one's snoozin', an' then I have to take my chances at wakin' him up jest right."

"If he is restless and does not go to sleep, what then?"

"Waal, then I buckle down to snorin' in a way that 'ud make the angels weep; an' when I 'low as he's gittin' mighty lonesome, I jest gives him a touch o' hocus-pocus. You'd lart to see him try to grin an' bear it, all alone by hisself, fur a spell. But when the spooks gits to tacklin' him in his bunk—the which he hain't no likin' fur sich bed-fellers, no way you kin fix it—then he begins to rair an' charge, an' purty soon he loses his grip, an' yells out fur Boggs."

Beth's eyes glittered as she listened.

"I'll be there!" she cried, panting with excitement. "What a fool I have been to lose such a treat for so long."

"Better let well enough alone," cautioned Boggs. "We're a-sailin' with the tide, as it is. Ef you put in your oar, an' ketch a crab with it, don't blame me."

But Beth paid no heed to this.

That night, when the camp was wrapped in the stillness which followed the closing of the saloons and dance-houses, she stole forth in the male disguise she had adopted for these occasions, since thus arrayed she might escape detection if she chanced to pass some one unusually belated, where her woman's dress would be fatal to secrecy.

Six-foot Si, who slept during the daytime, that he might be always on the watch at night, saw her creep forth.

He followed her to Moran's shanty, that he might be on hand in case of emergency.

He had fully made up his mind that, if she was ever detected, no man should live to betray her, no matter who he might be.

In his love for her, Six-foot Si made every other consideration subordinate to her welfare.

He was startled to see her stop abruptly just before she reached the shanty, and betray signs of surprise and uneasiness.

"It's come at last!" he said to himself. "Now to save her at all hazards!"

Creeping forward, he discovered what had arrested her. It was some one crouching under the window where she had proposed to secrete herself.

In the darkness it was impossible to make out who it was, but there was sufficient light to distinguish the dim outlines of a man.

Beth's heart was in her throat. Here was a contingency for which she had made no provision.

"We shall be betrayed!" she cried, within herself. "And then what?"

She thought of Joe Moran's changed demeanor when he learned who she was and what her mission.

Would he fly? That would not be in keeping with his character as she had read it.

No, his rage would be like that of a wolf at bay. He would seek to kill her, with as little ruth as he had shown her lover.

Well, he himself had taught her the art of self-defense. She had learned to shoot a pistol as he had said, as she pointed her finger.

"Why did I learn it?" she now asked herself, with a wild sense of elation. "For just this emergency! To meet him on a fair footing, if the worst came! If it does come, he will have to look out for himself!"

And she drew forth her revolver, as if for immediate use.

Six-foot Si was deceived by the action. He thought that she was contemplating an immediate assault on the man who was spying upon her "game."

What was to be done? How could he prevent the very catastrophe he had planned and struggled so patiently to intercept in the case of Joe Moran?

If he could but make her aware of his vicinity and so frighten her away. But he could not attract her attention without betraying himself to the spy also, and so, possibly, precipitating the very collision he longed to prevent.

Then, too, there was her personal peril. The spy might discover her, and shoot her without warning, to make good his own escape.

At this thought, it may be believed that Six-foot Si did not hesitate as to his course.

He instantly drew his revolver, resolved to shoot the spy on his betraying the slightest sign of having discovered Beth.

"It'll give her a show to git away," he reflected. "An' ef I have to stand the call o' Jedge Lynch, it'll be in as good a cause as I ask."

But new considerations pressed upon Beth.

"If I can do something to startle Miglesie," she thought, "he will desist, and so escape betraying himself. Some one's suspicions have been awakened—that's plain. But, whoever it is, he may not have divined the truth. If I can prevent any actual discovery, all may not yet be lost."

With this hope she instantly began to retreat, since nothing could be done where she was without self-betrayal.

It was fortunate that she thought to get round to the front of the shanty, and so made her way at right-angles, instead of directly backward. In that case, she must have rushed directly upon Six-foot Si, before he would have time to elude her, and such a meeting might have resulted in some desperate act which would have betrayed her to the spy.

As it was, Si followed her with a feeling of great relief.

"As quick as I kin, I'll frighten her off home," he promised himself. "Thar's whar the like of her ought to be. This hyar's men's business."

But there was no time for him to carry out his purpose, nor for Beth to execute hers.

She had scarcely got round to the front of the shanty, in a position where she could safely attempt to create a diversion, when a yell and a volley of oaths, accompanied by the sounds of a furious struggle, showed that matters had come to a climax between the spy and the inmates of the shanty.

For the moment she was fairly paralyzed with dismay. What should she do? What could she do? She felt a generous impulse to spring to the aid of her confederate. Whatever his faults, Bummer Boggs had been faithful to her and her cause.

Then, with reference to Joe Moran, she was seized with a wolfish desire to rush in upon him and have it out with him before he was armed against her by forewarning.

"He gave dear Rob no chance for his life!" she reflected. "He ought to be assailed in the same treacherous manner."

But while she hesitated, the opportunity was lost, as is so often the case in all our lives.

Six-foot Si thought only of her and her safety. All was up at the shanty. Whatever discovery had been made was now past recall.

With a bound he gained Beth's side, and clutched her arm.

So engrossed was she with the conflict that raged in her own breast, that she did not hear him or have the slightest warning of his vicinity until he was pouring his caution into her ear.

"Save yourself," he cried, speaking in his natural voice. "You can't do nothin' hyar. Leave it to me to do whatever kin be done. Run—run the best you know how."

And, with his clutch on her arm, he sought to start her on the way by pushing her toward her shanty.

"Who are you?" she demanded, resisting him.

She realized that it was some one who knew her secret, and, knowing it, was favorably disposed toward her, so she did not hesitate to betray her sex by her voice.

"The best friend the good Lord ever give you, fur jest this hyar scrape," replied Si, earnestly. "But, run fur your shanty. In a minute the hull camp will be out hyar. Don't let 'em ketch you in this hyar rig."

It is odd that sometimes in the greatest emergencies we are most impressed by some conventional trifle.

In that supreme moment, Six-foot Si was distressed, beyond everything else, by the thought of having the woman he loved subjected to the stare of the rude fellows of the camp in this guise, so ill-befitting her sex, so out of keeping

with that delicate womanliness which he prized beyond price.

His voice so vibrated with this fear, that Beth took it as if by contagion. For the moment, every other consideration was swallowed up in the dread of being exposed to the derisive yell of the men who had thus far been deferential to her.

With a heart-throb of gratitude to this unknown friend, which she did not stop to express, she sped away like a frightened bird, nor stopped for breath till she was secure in the shelter of her shanty, and had removed and secreted her disguise, and replaced it with her wonted garb.

Then her earlier fears returned. Suppose Joe Moran had discovered all? Suppose Migglesie betrayed her?

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD MAN CROCKER TAKES A HAND.

HAVING once given his confidence, Joe Moran's heart went out to Old-man Crocker, and he would readily have made an indiscreet display of his sudden attachment.

When, wary of exciting Bummer Boggs's suspicions, Old-man Crocker repulsed Joe, a reaction set in, casting Moran into deeper gloom and desolation than before.

Nothing was further from his thoughts than that there was anything in his experience different from what it appeared. So, not understanding Crocker's purpose, he thought that he had reconsidered his overtures of friendship.

In this state, he was an easy victim to the arts of his false pard. He drank more than ever, and saw whatever the ventriloquist suggested to his diseased fancy.

So came the night on which Beth was to witness his suffering.

In dread of the ordeal that awaited him, Joe had remained at the gambling table until the last man had "passed out," and the sleepy bar-keeper had blown out most of the lights.

While they walked home, Bummer Boggs yawned and nodded and staggered about with affected drowsiness, and cast himself upon the floor and fell to snoring the moment they were in the shanty.

As he lay awake, tossing in feverish expectancy, Joe was impressed by the dead stillness of the night.

There was not a breath of wind. Not a leaf stirred. Not one of the usual night sounds could be heard far or near. To his distempered fancy it was as if all the earth lay dead.

But, hark!

Far away up the mountain passes, so faint as to be scarcely distinguishable, rose a cry.

"Help! help! Mur-ur-urder!"

Had he really heard it? It came in one of those temporary lulls in Bummer Boggs's snoring, when the sleeper seemed to rest and gather force for a new series of blasts.

Every muscle in the listener's body became tense, as he strained his hearing to catch the sound again, while a clammy ooze started from every pore.

"It was only the cry of some night bird," he said to himself.

That was the coward's lie, the effort to deceive self, with self the conscious deceiver.

If he had thought for a moment that it might really be the cry of a bird, why that turgid throbbing of his heart, followed by dead pauses in which it seemed as if he were dying? Why those fierce surges of fever heat, alternating with the chill of the grave?

A death-rattle, so close that he sprung away, and gazed to see if some one lay dying between him and the wall, scattered to the winds this feeble breastwork of pretense.

"Curse my topknot!" he growled, striving to rally. "It's got a crick in it somewhar."

And resolutely he lay down again, resisting the temptation to rouse his companion, so blissfully free from these haunting terrors.

"I'd give a thousand dollars for one night's sleep like that!" he muttered, gazing enviously at the recumbent figure of the bummer.

But the sound of his name startled him out of his useless fancy.

"Joe! Joe! I say, Joe! Wake up! I've got it now, as sure as shootin'."

How many times in the past had he been roused by such a summons, until he had come to swear at his importunate partner on such occasions and turn over again to sleep.

But now he sat upright, and stared through the darkness at the point from which the voice seemed to come.

There was nothing to be seen, nothing further to be heard but the regular snoring of the bummer.

Dripping with icy sweat, the conscience-haunted wretch stared and listened.

An impatient oath came to him, followed by a despairing sigh.

It was all so real that his inflamed imagination began to play tricks with him, and staring hard into the darkness, he seemed to see a shadowy figure bending over a barrel stood on end to serve as a table, tracing slowly and with untiring patience upon a scrap of paper like that which had borne the warning to beware of Bob Cady.

As he gazed the phantom became more and more distinct. He could see the candle, so long left unsnuffed that the incrustated end of the wick had bent over, and was causing the tallow to gutter on one side. In its spectral light the ghastly face of his dead pard stood out as he had seen it many a time in the old days when he was poring over the baffling cryptogram.

How drawn with deep lines of intense application, how haggard and thin it was.

As he stared, Bob looked up at him with the old bloodshot eyes.

He could endure no more, but shrieked out:

"Boggs! Boggs! fur God's sake!"

"Eh? what's the row, boss?"

"See! see!" shrieked the haunted man, pointing into the darkness.

In a flash the phantom disappeared, and rubbing his eyes sleepily, Boggs declared:

"I don't see nothin'. Whar?"

But Joe saw nothing now. He fell back gasping.

A weird laugh, coming apparently from the head of his bunk, caused him to start up again, and leap out on the floor.

"Did you hear it? Thar! thar! that laugh!"

And he clung to the old toper, quivering from head to foot.

"Take it cool, boss," urged the bummer, patting him on the back.

"But did you hear it?"

"Waal, no, boss, I can't say as I adzackly hyeared anythin'. But, it's all right, ye know. Take a pull at this hyar. It'll do ye a power o' good. Thar! that's what ye want. You'll feel better in a minute."

Morgan drank eagerly, and sat down on the edge of his bunk holding his head in his hands.

"Hark! hark! thar it goes ag'in!" he cried, suddenly leaping up, and clutching once more at his companion.

This time it was a groan coming from under the bunk on which he sat.

Thoroughly distracted, he took to walking the floor, Boggs supporting him and trying to comfort him.

"Boggs," he whimpered, piteously, "I'm 'lowin' as perhaps we'd better git shut o' this hyar shanty. It's ha'nted, as sure as shoot in'."

I can't stand it, I tell ye, much longer."

There was a sob of weary helplessness in his voice, and he with difficulty restrained unmanly tears.

"But whar'll we go?" asked Boggs, in a most matter-of-fact voice. "The shanty's all right. It's an uncommon good one."

"But a man was killed in it, ye know."

"Not in it, pard. The man what owned it was killed on the outside. But ef you stood on a leetle p'int like that thar, whar'd you git a vacant shanty right to yer mind, I'd like to know?"

This point was so obvious, that the shivering wretch made no attempt to answer it, the more so as, at that moment, the sound of a stealthy footstep—just one—seemingly directly under the shanty wall, caused him to start as if he had heard the click of a revolver at his back.

Bummer Boggs heard this, too, through the open window; but he was not disturbed, probably because he had been listening for some time for some sign of life in that direction.

As Boggs gave no indication of hearing this step, to which a man in the mining district would naturally be keenly alive, Joe said nothing about it, believing it to be one of his many fancies.

Meanwhile, Boggs was secretly congratulating himself on having got his victim fairly started, so that his little comedy should not be a failure the first time it was honored by an audience.

"All I've got to do, is to jest keep him a-goin', and she'll have a show what'll pay her fur turnin' out. But I hope she won't take to the thing so's to git the notion o' comin' every night. The show'll git monotonous, an' then she'll insist on an entire change o' programme every performance."

"Suppose," suggested Moran, "we should go out to your place, fur a change?"

"The burrow whar you found me rootin'?"

"Yes. It will be out of doors, an' I may git shut o' this cursed houndin'."

"You kin try it ef you like," answered Boggs, who knew the usual effect of opposition. "But I'm allowin' as you won't find it to yer notion. It's mighty draughty out thar. I'm doin' a heap better in hyar. But ef you say it's a go, we'll try it to-morrer, or to-night, fur that matter."

The thing was made so easy for him, that, like all things w ich can be done whenever we choose, it lost its pressing interest, and Joe was content to wait until he was forced to it.

Meanwhile, he was trembling so that Boggs induced him to sit down on the box substituted for a chair which has been mentioned, while his solicitous attendant went to the shelf over the fireplace, ostensibly for the black bottle.

But if this was really his purpose, he was diverted from it by a startled ejaculation from Joe.

His alert ear had caught the sound of voices, seemingly of persons passing by the shanty.

"I tell you, pard," said the first voice, positively, "Bob Cady ain't dead!"

"The deuce he ain't!" was the incredulous response.

"No, he ain't," insisted the first, his voice becoming louder, as if he were approaching the shanty in which Joe Moran sat straining his ears to catch every syllable.

"I should like to know why he ain't. I seen him buried myself."

"That don't make no difference. I seen him alive an' kickin' only the other night, an' that I'll swear to."

"But you *can't* have seen him. I tell you he was as dead as Julius Cæsar. You bet yer life Joe Moran done that business up brown. Thar was a dozen knife-holes in him."

"Waal, I seen him or his ghost, an' that's flat."

The speaker broke off with an impatient ejaculation, as if he had run into something in the dark.

"D'ye hyear that?" gasped Moran, clutching the sides of his seat for support.

"What's that, ole man?" asked Boggs, in a tone of voice which indicated that he had heard nothing, while he kept on fumbling for the black bottle.

"Somebody passin' the shanty," replied Moran. "Don't you hyear 'em talkin'? You must hear 'em. It's as plain as anythin' can be."

But, notwithstanding this petulant insistence, Joe believed that he alone heard the voices.

"I reckon not," said Boggs, going over to the window, apparently to listen.

The voices resumed.

"What's the row, Tim?"

"I stepped into a blasted hole, an' nearly snapped my neck off!"

"But what's that about Bob Cady? You must be gittin' maggots, ole man? Whar did you 'low to see him?"

"Right hyar."

And from this point the speakers lowered their voices, and seemed to pause directly before the shanty.

"Right hyar?"

"Comin' out o' that shanty."

"Why, thar's whar Sam Sutter goes to roost."

"An' who's Sam Sutter, eh?"

"Joe Moran—blow me ef it ain't!"

"O' course it is."

"Do you 'low as Bob come back fur to see him?"

"I don't 'low nothin'. I only say what I see."

"What did you see, Tim?"

"Waal, I was a-layin' out hyar t'other night—about a week gone, I reckon—drunker'n a b'iled owl, an' I was waked up by the most 'tarnalest racket over hyar in this shanty what you ever did hyar. I 'lowed as somebody was gittin' run through the riddle-box fur all he was worth, but it wa'n't none o' my funeral, so I laid low."

"Sich a scatteration you never hyeared. I 'lowed they'd pull the shanty down about their ears, when *bang* goes the door, wide open, an' out jumps Bob Cady as if the devil was after him."

"How do you know it was Bob, Tim? It may have been somebody what looked like him."

"Gammon! Don't I know Bob Cady when I see him? I'd orter."

"Waal, go ahead."

"Out comes Bob Cady, as I was sayin'. But you'd orter a-seen him! Great Cæsar! I don't reckon as a man looks like that more'n once, an' that's when he's about ready fur the long box. He was as white as Aleck Tiffany's b'iled shirt, only fur the blood that was on him, an' you bet thar was a power o' that. An' wild? I never see the beat. The look of him made my hair raise on end."

"Out he comes, a-shriekin', an' clips it down the street on the clean jump. Then, all of a sudden, he goes down kerwhop, an' greans, an' that's the end of him."

"Didn't you go whar he was an' see how he was comin' on?"

"Waal, I reckon not!"

"Then, what went on hyar at the shanty?"

"I didn't stop fur to take that in. I'd got my money's worth, an' more'n I'd counted on, so I dug out hyar fur all I was worth."

"Tim, I 'low as you done the best thing fur your bacon."

"I always calcalate to."

"Do you reckon, now, as that was Bob Cady—Bob Cady *himself*?"

"Waal, between you an' me, that's jest what's been stickin' in my crop. You bet I wasn't takin' in' after no sich lookin' critter as I see come out o' this hyar shanty, an' I wa'n't goin' into no slanty what he'd jest come out of. I knowed Bob Cady was dead, as well as you do, an' that's what got me."

"Do you 'low as it was his spook?"

"It wa'n't nothin' else, Andy, ur I'm a liar!"

"An' he'd come back fur to have it out with Moran?"

"I reckon."

An awed pause followed this conclusion. Joe Moran groaned aloud.

Presently he leaped up in a frenzy of despair.

"Give me my revolver!" he whispered, hoarsely. "I'll ram that lie down that galoot's throat!"

"Take it easy, pard," admonished Boggs, in a soothing, indulgent tone. "What's the row, ole man?"

"Didn't you hyear 'em?" gasped Moran, beginning to waver as he realized the futility of fighting these phantom voices.

"No, pard," replied Boggs, "I didn't hyear nothin'."

"Waal, I did, you infernal ole fraud!" shouted a powerful voice directly behind him, and before he had time to turn, he felt himself clutched by a pair of iron hands that reached in through the open window.

In a flash Migglesie realized that he had been mistaken in supposing that the footstep he had heard was Beth Crawford's.

He recognized the voice of Old-man Crocker, and knew that he had been detected by as bad a man to deal with as there was in the camp.

The suddenness of the assault unnerved him, and, with a shriek of dismay, he struggled like a madman.

Joe Moran stood and stared, stupefied by the abruptness of the apparition, and for the moment believing that it was but a new phase of his persecution.

CHAPTER XX.

SHUFFLING UNDER THE BOARD.

"HOLD on, pard! Don't shoot!" shouted Old-man Crocker. "It's only me, an' I've bagged this—this infernal swindler! He's been playin'—playin' roots on ye! Blast your hide!"

This last was addressed to his captive, and followed close upon the explosion of a revolver, for Migglesie, feeling that he was in a desperate strait, and that Joe Moran would certainly kill him, if the public sentiment of the Run did not demand his exit "up a tree," had taken the shortest means to stop Old-man Crocker's mouth and secure his own release.

Crocker knocked the weapon away in time to save himself, but in doing so lost his hold on his prisoner, and Migglesie bolted for the door with a quickness that left the astonished Moran no time to recover from his bewilderment.

"Stop him! stop him!" shouted Crocker, in his excitement leaping in through the window in hot pursuit.

"Hold on!" cried Joe Moran, seizing him.

"What's the row with Boggs?"

"Why, man, he's been playin' you fur the whisky! I've ketched him dead to rights. But, come on, or he'll give us the slip yit."

And tearing away from Moran's relaxed grasp, he burst through the door which Migglesie had slammed behind him.

The fugitive had got a fair start, but he could yet be dimly distinguished flying down the street; and whipping out his revolver, Old-man Crocker blazed away at him.

"Stop him! stop him!" he yelled, at the top of his lungs, in the hope that some one would emerge from a shanty in the line of Boggs's flight, and recognizing the voice of the pursuer would "pull him up."

But, just the reverse of his expectations happened.

His heart swelling with pleasure at the thought of having been of service to the woman he loved, Six-foot Si crouched down to escape detection, just as the door of the shanty was burst open, and Bummer Boggs leaped forth.

He passed Si without perceiving him, but as Old-man Crocker sped by in pursuit, Si thrust out his foot, and the "bad man" of Bloody Run went to grass with a crash.

Before he had time to recover himself, a thump on the head with the butt of a revolver, in the hands of a man who knew how to handle that weapon in all ways to the best effect, "fixed" him for some time to come.

Having now done all that he could with safety to himself to aid Boggs's escape, Si had to get out of that vicinity as quickly as possible.

That left Joe Moran to take up the pursuit in which Old-man Crocker had been so summarily arrested, but with only the most confused notion as to what it all meant.

The fact that Boggs had run, was more significant to him than anything that he had caught of Old-man Crocker's hurried accusation.

Flight was a confession of guilt of some kind, and feeling vaguely that he had been wronged, he knew not how, Moran resolved to at least capture his late pard, and hold him until the matter could be straightened out.

There is no place where men can be fetched out of their beds more quickly than in a mining-camp, at the rattle of fire-arms, with an accompaniment of yells and bellowing blasphemies.

A man has but to jump into a pair of jack-boots, and snatch his pistol-belt from under his pillow, when he is ready for any emergency.

So, though Six-foot Si's interference probably protected Migglesie from being shot by the infuriated Crocker, it did not save him from capture.

Joe Moran was after him in hot pursuit, though not with Crocker's impulse to shoot him, and before he got half-way through the camp men were "showing up" in every direction.

To be accused, is to be presumed guilty, the

world round, no matter what theories we frame in the matter; and the first impulse of men, as of dogs, is join in the hue and cry after a fugitive.

A score of revolvers bristled around Bummer Boggs, and a stern "backer" behind each commanded him to halt.

He knew the temper of the men with whom he had to deal, and how futile it would be to continue flight in the face of this general challenge. However desperate his strait, his only chance was to surrender, and then strive to outwit them with a glib tongue.

"I cave, gents," he said, and added, turning to Dandy Dave:—"I put myself under your protection ag'in' Ole-man Crocker."

"What's the row with Ole-man Crocker?" asked Dave.

"God only knows," replied Boggs. "But jest now he tried to rub me out, an' I run to git away from him."

"What was you doin' to him, that he should go fur you?"

"I wa'n't doin' nothin' to him. I hain't never done nothin' to him. I was lookin' out fur Sam Sutter, an' Crocker he jest jumps me like a catamount. Hyar's Sam now, as kin speak fur me. Sutter, was I doin' anythin' to the ole man when he piled into me? I want you to tell the boys all about it, an' to stand in with me ag'in' Crocker, which the same he hain't got no call fur to jump onto me, nohow."

Boggs was playing his cards for all they were worth. In a tight fix, there is nothing like bold play. Many a hand without "a dirty pair" has bluffed to win.

Moran was rather taken aback at being met thus boldly, as his bewildered look showed.

The boys all turned to him for explanation, and really he had no explanation to give, not being himself clear as to what it was all about.

"What's the racket, Sam?" asked Dandy Dave.

Whereupon Moran did what all petty natures do under like circumstances—he flew into a passion with Boggs as the cause of his embarrassment, crying wrathfully:

"What in Cain have you been up to, any-way?"

"Eh?" cried Boggs, with well-simulated astonishment. "Air you standin' in with Ole-man Crocker? What have I done to you, that you should turn ag'in' me?"

Moran had no answer ready. Truth to tell, he felt that he owed Boggs some gratitude.

"What is the row, Sutter?" urged Dandy Dave again.

"Whar's Ole-man Crocker?" demanded Moran, looking about him. "He'll straighten the thing out fur ye."

But Crocker did not answer to his name, and then the boys stared at one another.

"This galoot must 'a' downed him," suggested Moran. "He left my shanty goin' fur him like a thousand o' brick."

"No, I didn't!" cried Boggs, earnestly. "After I got out o' his clutches, I lit out, an' never looked back. He's a bad man, I tell you, an' I didn't want to have nothin' to do with him."

All could well believe this. But what had become of Crocker?

"He must be somewhar between hyar an' my shanty," said Moran. "Come along, an' we'll look him up."

The boys set out at once, but Dandy Dave felt a signaling touch on his arm, and turned to receive a look of intelligence from the Teaser.

It was not difficult for him to separate from the others for a moment, so as to exchange a word with the Teaser without detection.

"Waal, pard, what's up?" he asked, curiously.

He began to see that there was something below the surface in this outbreak.

"It's too late for Judge Lynch to-right," said the Teaser, hurriedly.

"Of course it is," assented Dave, adding slyly—"if you say so!"

Six-foot Si ignored this feeler, and went on:

"Put him under a guard that belongs to you, onderstand, but with Chippy along."

"I do onderstand, and I've got the men, too."

"Have you got a half-dozen more that you kin count on?"

"You bet I have. I don't run this camp without the tools to run it with, bet yer sweet life!"

"That'll do. I'll see you later."

And Si slipped away.

"Waal, hyar's a go!" reflected Dandy Dave, beginning, as he supposed, to "see into the grindstone." "I reckon the Teaser didn't come to this camp jest fur the fun o' the thing. I reckon, too, that he didn't give yours truly the knock-down without calcalatin' to make somethin' off'n it. Waal, he could 'a' used me up, ef he'd wanted to, an' that's a fact. I've saved my bacon; then what do I keer ef he gits away with Ole-man Crocker, or any o' the rest o' 'em? But what's the racket, I want to know, an' how's Crocker mixed up in it? It's all along o' Joe Moran—that's flat. I reckon he ain't done with Bob Cady yit!"

"Hyar's the Teaser an' ole Boggs, both new

men. They dropped in only two or three days apart, an' right on the heels o' Moran. Then Boggs gits in with Moran, thicker'n thieves, an' now it turns out that he's passin' keards under the table to the Teaser. Somethin's comin' to a head hyar, sure!"

But at this point his reflections were broken in upon by sounds of an excitement near Sutter's shanty.

A stentorian voice announced the discovery, and rushing together at that point the crowd found the object of their search lying sprawled out upon his face.

"He's done fur, gents," declared one of those individuals who are always ready to put the worst interpretation upon everything. "The galoot must 'a' plugged him, after all."

"Turn him over," suggested a more hopeful one. "Maybe the ole man ain't done fur yit."

It was plain that no love was wasted on this man who had been called the Left Bower of Bloody Run. Whether he was dead or alive, was a mere matter of curious speculation.

"He's all right, boys," declared the Bouncer, after a moment's examination. "Thar ain't no blood on him, nowhar. I reckon he's got a crack on the head, or somethin'."

"That's what's the matter with him," announced Chippy. "Hyar's a lump on his top-knot what never grewed thar, nohow."

"Bear a hand hyar, boys, an' we give him a lift into Sutter's shanty."

And the unconscious man was thus disposed of.

The simplest restorative measures brought him to, and he awoke to consciousness in the sweetest kind of a temper. He would have leaped out of bed and "clinched" Bummer Boggs forthwith, but that his friends restrained him, assuring him that they had the offender safe in quod, and that a few hours quiet might save him serious inconvenience from the thump on his head.

"But what's all this row about?" asked Dandy Dave. "What air you an' Sutter up to? We've asked Sam, an' he's throwed off on us."

"Hang it all," cried Moran, impatiently, "how kin I tell ye, when I don't rightly know myself?"

"You don't, eh?" responded Old-man Crocker, looking at him with an expression not far from contempt.

"No, I don't!" retorted Moran, botly. "It's all o' your makin'. You jumps on him through the winder, without no ifs nor buts. I don't see what call you had to mount him, nohow."

"Waal, ef you can't hyear nothin' drop when a brick house falls in on ye, it won't do you no hurt to think it over till mornin'."

"You've got him?"—to Dandy Dave.

"Yes, we've got him fast enough, but I'd like to know what fur."

"Waal, jest you hang on to him till mornin', an' when I turn out o' hyar I'll tell ye what fur."

"Give me some water," he ordered Chippy, "an' then the lot o' you cl'ar out o' hyar, an' let me sleep."

"I reckon," he added, in conclusion, looking at Moran with a peculiar expression, "ef you turn in on the floor, in Boggs's place, you'll have a quiet time to mull over this, an' maybe you'll git somethin' out of it."

CHAPTER XXI.

BETH STANDS FIRM.

MEANWHILE Six-foot Si had taken upon himself the most difficult task of his life—no less bold a step than facing Beth Crawford in the character of an adviser.

At Mulligan's Bend he had set upon her the young minister whom the boys had got to conduct her lover's funeral, and after him, Iron Despard. But now he must step boldly forward in his own person, and confront her.

"I'd druther be shot!" he reflected. "What'll I say to her?"

But his head was in a whirl—the more so, that there was no time for deliberation.

When he knocked at her door, his only hope was that she had fled.

But, no; there came her voice, cold and stern, demanding:

"Who's there?"

He pictured her standing in the middle of the room with a drawn revolver, ready for any emergency. And this was indeed the way in which she awaited her visitor.

"It's me, the Teaser," he replied, feeling as if it would not be so embarrassing if she did not know him in his true character.

Beth knew the Teaser by sight, and that it was he who had interposed to save her from discovery a few minutes before.

She therefore threw open the door without apprehension.

"What do you wish?" she asked him, standing on the threshold, now in her proper garb. "But first, I owe you some acknowledgment for your kindness—"

"Don't mention it, marm!" pleaded Si, standing hat in hand.

"And now you have come to tell me what has happened?"

"They've got him, marm."

"Has he been hurt?"

"Not yet. But—"

"Well?"

"Ye know that Sutter won't take no sich game easy, an' in the mornin'— That's what we've got to look out fur."

"How came Mr. Sutter to detect him?"

"It wa'n't Sutter as done the detectin'. It was Ole-man Crocker."

"But Mr. Sutter must have suspected, and got him to watch?"

"I reckon not. Crocker was playin' his own hand."

"But what had he to do with Mr. Sutter's affairs?"

"Waal, ye see, thar's somethin' of a see-saw in this hyar camp, between Ole-man Crocker an' Dandy Dave; an' Crocker 'lowed, I reckon, that it might be handy to have Sutter stand in with him ag'in' Dave, ef it ever come to the rub."

"And Mr. Crocker—what has he found out?"

"Waal, he's dropped purty solid, I reckon."

"By the way, how is it that you know so much about this matter?"

"Me?" ejaculated Si, struck all in a heap.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm the Teaser, ye know."

"But that throws no light on the matter. Who is the Teaser, and why has he interested himself in my concerns?"

"Ef so be you'd let that pass, marm!" stammered Si, trembling with apprehension.

"As you please," was Beth's ready acquiescence. "But, to return. What have we to fear in the morning?"

"Crocker will blow the hull thing. An'—ef you will excuse me, I've made so bold as to come to you to ask ye to git out o' hyar before the bottom falls out."

"Leave Bloody Run—and—and my revenge!"

"Ye see, marm, this hyar's a mighty rough place. The boys has treated you well, not allowin' as you was up to anythin', ye understand. But when they drop, it'll be different."

"But if the worst comes, I will appeal to them. It needs but the statement of my case, and they will hang Joe Moran higher than Haman! To be sure, I shall lose all I have labored for, but he will not live to triumph."

"I'm afeard, marm, as you don't know the boys. Ye see, they're sworn to stand by Sutter, an' they'll do it, on general principles, even if you be a woman. It's a law o' this place, that no man as comes hyar shall be pulled up fur anythin' what he done before he come hyar. The boys stands by one another in that."

"Then I will fight it out by myself! Nothing will induce me to abandon my project! Joe Moran shall die by my hand! I have sworn it, and if I seemed to waver just now, when there appeared to be no alternative, I am glad I have been forced back to my original position. I'll kill him, or die in the attempt!"

"You'll find that that ain't no go, marm," insisted Si. "Ef thar's anythin' they don't know, they'll squeeze it out o' Boggs in the mornin', an' then—"

"If there is anything they don't know?" repeated Beth, catching him up quickly. "Is there anything they don't know?"

"I 'low they hain't got round so's to rope you in yit," answered Si, truthfully. "But they'll git it out o' Boggs in the mornin'."

"No, he will not betray me. It cannot serve him, and we will promise him a sufficient reward to keep his mouth shut."

"They've got a mighty persuadin' way with a bit o' rope," suggested Si. "You hain't never seen it tried on, like as not."

Beth had to admit to herself that this was true, but she was not yet to the end of her resources.

"You say he is in prison. We can bribe his guards to let him escape. I have all the money that will be required, and I am willing to give any amount. These men are rascals all round, and they will sell one another out for money."

But this was not Si's aim. He wanted to get her away from the place, so that she would abandon her ruthless purpose of revenge.

"That's no-go," he said. "Ole-man Crocker's best man is on the guard. You couldn't git away with him no more than you could with Ole-man Crocker himself."

Then he clutched at a desperate chance.

"Maybe," he stammered, "ef you knowed who I be, you might be more willin' to go with me. Ill see you through safer'n your own brother."

And he looked at her wistfully.

Now Beth was very curious to know who it was that had taken such an interest in her, so she at once availed herself of this chance to find out.

"You are a stranger to me," she said, hiding her burning curiosity. "I don't think I ever saw you before."

Si wriggled uneasily, and finally came out with it.

"I'm Six-foot Si, o' Mulligan's Bend!"

"And Mrs. Dangerfield has sent you after me?" cried Beth, not very well pleased by this seeming persistence.

"Mrs. Dangerfield?" repeated Si, who had

never dreamed that there could be any misunderstanding after he had one announced himself.

"Yes," said Beth. "She was very kind, no doubt, in trying to dissuade me from my purpose. But this is carrying it too far!"

Si hung his head, feeling that he had now put his foot in it with a vengeance.

"I come on my own hook," he replied, standing to the rack with his wonted integrity.

Then Beth conceived a new idea.

"And was it you who had the minister speak to me?"

"Yes."

"And was it through you that Colonel Dangerfield sent for me, and that his wife came to me afterwards?"

"I 'lowed as the colonel might hold over the leetle parson some," admitted Si, with the simple straightforwardness of a child. "But did Mrs. Dangerfield try her hand too? That was good of her."

Beth's next question came very slowly.

"Why have you interested yourself so much in me?"

Then some kind angel took pity on poor Si, and gave him a happy inspiration.

"Waal, ye see," he stammered, "I knowed Bob before that thar low-down sealawag got away with him, an' I reckoned as I'd orter do the best I could by ye."

Beth looked at him, and recalled his appearance in Mulligan's Bend. He had sacrificed his magnificent beard, to make his disguise the more complete.

"I owe you more thanks than I can ever express," she said, with an unsteady voice, extending her hand to him.

He took it with the bashfulness of a school-boy, and as gingerly as if it were some fragile device of glass.

"Don't mention it!" was all he could stammer.

"And now," said Beth, "I ask one more service of you. See that Boggs escapes to-night."

"You won't give it up?"

"No. If the worst comes, I shall stand alone against them all. But I do not wish you to endanger yourself in my behalf."

"Harm!"—and Six-foot Si's breast swelled with earnest resolve, "ef harm comes to you it'll be across the dead body o' Six-foot Si! You kin gamble on that!"

And as if frightened at his own boldness, he hurried away.

Beth stood looking after him with feelings which she did not attempt to analyze. Of one thing she was conscious. She had never been so impressed by any other man save Bob Cady.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

BLOODY RUN had no special provision for the detention of prisoners. As was their boast:

"Judge Lynch cleans up his docket so's not to leave anythin' over night!"

It was therefore necessary to place a guard over Bummer Boggs, and in constituting it, three in number—two of his own men and Chippy—Dandy Dave remarked:

"Thar'll be a four-hands-round of ye, boys. So with a deck o' keards an' a bottle o' whisky, ye oughtn't to be lonesome."

"Lave us alone, Cap!" replied Auley McCaffrey, patting the bottle affectionately.

And the boys who were not of the guard went back to their beds with a feeling that perhaps they didn't have the best of the bargain.

Six-foot Si had gone direct from his interview with Beth Crawford to Dandy Dave, with whom he had exchanged a few words. Then Dandy Dave had dropped a hint to the prisoner and to the two guards whom he "owned," so that they knew what to expect.

Chippy alone entered upon his duties in good faith, delighted to serve his master.

Because of a word dropped here and there by Dandy Dave, all of the boys did not go back to their beds, though they appeared to do so.

The result was a meeting about an hour later between Dandy Dave and a half-dozen men of his selecting, in which they received whispered instructions relative to an enterprise which was to be put into execution before morning.

"Ole man," said McCaffrey's confederate, who enjoyed the euphonious handle of Bazoo, because of his rather boisterous voice, "we'll have to put you in a hopple, but we won't do nothin' to hinder you from shufflin' the keards nor crookin' yer elbow with the rest of us."

"That suits me down to the ground," answered Boggs, holding his legs to be tied.

"This hyar's more fur the looks o' the thing than anythin' else," observed Bazoo, bending to the work of tying the prisoner's legs so that, with half a yard of loose rope between them, he would suffer no inconvenience, unless he attempted to run. "I reckon you can't git away with the three of us."

"I sha'n't want to git away until the bottle's empty," replied Boggs. "Pass 'er over hyar, Chippy. I'll take you fur my pardner, Bazoo, ef you're agreeable. An' now throw around lively fur deal."

With Boggs's legs out of sight, you would

have taken them for a party of friends bound to make a night of it, with the bumper the jolliest of the quartette.

Bummer Boggs was elder hand to Chippy, and it was perhaps attributable to this fact that luck seemed to run to Old-man Crocker's representative.

At any rate, the satisfaction of being ahead of the game laid Chippy more open to the snare of the bottle, which Boggs pressed upon him.

For two hours the game went on undisturbed, when the trill of a locust apparently passed unnoticed by any of the gamblers.

But as he played his last card with a thump and a laughing ejaculation of chagrin at his hard luck, Boggs pushed the stakes toward Chippy, and followed them up with the bottle.

"Hyar's to cross yer luck, pardner," he said.

"You've got to drink it, ole man. You've skinned us long enough."

"I'm sorry to take yer money, boss; but I'd be a darn sight sorrier fur to have you git mine," laughed Chippy, as he tipped up the bottle.

While he was glancing cross-eyed along its glistening side, at a proper angle for an astronomical observation, he was almost choked by a sudden shock, as Boggs caught him in an embrace that secured his weapon, and while he lowered the bottle, gasping and coughing, and trying to make out the meaning of this unexpected demonstration, he heard a stern voice command:

"Hands up, gents! We've got you on the list, every last one of ye!"

And blinking with strangulation, Chippy made out a circle of bristling revolvers backed by men in masks—pieces of black cloth tied across their faces.

The other members of the guard had dropped their cards, and thrown their hands around in quest of their weapons, but their seeming design of resistance was checked by the same stern voice.

"Cheese it, pards! Thar ain't nothin' in it."

"What do you want?" demanded Bazoo.

"First, we'll trouble you not to make any more racket than you have to, fur ef you should happen to fetch the boys down on us, you three would pass out mighty lively. Next, we've come fur your prisoner. His health won't stand this climate."

"You bet, pards!" declared Boggs, with great positiveness. "Chippy, ole man, ef you'll take this hyar hopple off o' me, I'll put it on to you in the best shape I know how."

Boggs grinned at his joke, and to Chippy's snort of disgust, returned:

"You can't have all the good things in this hyar life, boss. You've cleaned me an' my pard out of our rocks, an' you ought to be satisfied with that."

The guards were quickly disarmed and hopped, and then the whole party marched silently out of camp.

"What air you 'lowin' to do with us, gents?" asked Bazoo, as if apprehensive that they were to be held as hostages.

"Don't you git into a sweat," advised his captor. "We'll turn you chaps loose as soon as we git fur enough away so's we kin do it safely."

And this was really done, but alas! they were all securely bound and gagged, and left for their friends to find them in the morning. There was no chance of their getting loose and giving the alarm.

So Bummer Boggs went his way rejoicing, without knowing who his rescuers were individually, though he knew that they were all men of Bloody Run, acting by the orders of Dandy Dave.

They gave him instructions as to what he was to do with himself, and then stole back to the camp, and went to bed like honest citizens.

In the morning there was a great "burrah-boys" over the escape of the prisoner.

Not only he, but his guard, had vanished as completely as if they had all gone up in the air, and it took a good two-hours' search before the latter were found, "tied up like a bunch of radishes."

Not the least surprised and angered man, to all appearance, was Dandy Dave, and he plied the guard with an almost endless string of questions.

But when the matter had been drawn out to the last detail, it amounted to only this:—friends of Bummer Boggs had cleverly rescued him.

Chippy told his story with profound chagrin to his patron.

Old-man Crocker listened grimly, asking not a single question. Indeed, Dandy Dave left no need.

But now rose the question of the night before.

"What's all this hyar row about? What was Boggs up to, that you should jump on him?"

Old-man Crocker looked about on the circle of eager faces, with a contemptuous frown, and then he spoke with a deliberation which led more than one to believe that he was telling as much as he chose, and keeping the rest back.

"He was playin' Sam Sutter fur the whisky—that's what he was doin'."

Moran flushed hotly.

"Boggs a-playin' me?" he cried.

"You bet—an' bad," was Crocker's avowal.

"How was he playin' you, Sam?" asked Dandy Dave, to whom Six-foot Si had vouchsafed no explanation, and who was therefore devoured with curiosity.

He was galled more than he would have liked to show, by being thus forced to act in the dark.

"He wa'n't playin' me fur nothin'!" declared Moran, angrily.

"Bab!" scoffed Crocker. "Did you ever hear a ventriloquist?"

"A ventriloquist?" cried Moran.

"A ventriloquist!" reiterated Crocker, scornfully. "It takes you a powerful long time to drop."

But Moran did "drop" at last, and he was in as fine a rage over it as any one need wish to see.

"I'd murder him, ef I believed that!" he shouted, striking a table with his clenched fist.

"Git ready to murder, then. You'll git round to believe it one o' these days."

Moran began to walk the floor, thinking the matter over.

The more he thought, the worse he swore, but neither he nor Crocker would gratify the raging curiosity of the crowd who listened open-mouthed to this enigmatical dialogue.

"It ain't none o' my funeral," said Crocker. "I 'lowed to befriend Sutter. But he wouldn't have it, so now I'm done."

And he walked off in sullen dignity, with his hands in his pockets.

But this was only "a blind." Old-man Crocker was not the man to give up beaten by such a man as Bummer Boggs.

"Thar's more in this than I reckoned," he mused. "Thar's the chap as laid me out—not Bummer Boggs, by a long sight—an' then hyar's these galoots what has snaked him off. I'll bet I'll lay fur somebody, an' fur somebody not a thousand mile from this hyar camp, too!"

But of this resolve he gave not the slightest hint to any one. From the time he declared that he "passed out," he had the appearance of a man who washed his hands of the whole matter.

"Boys," said Joe Moran, "suppose we call this thing off? Step up to the bar an' irrigate, an' we won't say no more about it."

They were ready enough to drink at his expense, but they resolved, one and all, to keep their eyes open for future developments.

"This thing ain't done yet!" declared one of their number to a circle of assenting listeners. "Jest you lay low, an' you'll hyear somethin' drop, one o' these days."

"An' it'll drop loud!" corroborated another.

Dandy Dave submitted to the enforced suspense less contentedly than any of the others. He felt that he was paying in bitter coin for the sham reputation he had gained by the seeming overthrow of the Teaser. He was being used, and that is always abused.

And all the while Old-man Crocker was pondering.

What company of men were interested in persecuting Joe Moran? Who but the outlaws whom he had tricked out of the reward for their services?

Why did they refrain from executing summary vengeance? What could they be after in this roundabout way? Evidently the precious cryptogram, which they might have reason to suspect Moran had hidden somewhere.

Would they abandon their project with this first rebuff? Old-man Crocker argued not. And that was his chance of yet triumphing in the investigation he had undertaken.

"We've run one o' the gang out o' the camp, but that ain't sayin' that the rest has skipped, too. It's them as I'm layin' low fur, an' you bet I don't spring no empty trap the next time!"

To this end he let it be supposed that he believed it the trick of an old bummer to get his whisky, and that he had abandoned all further concern in the matter in disgust.

Six-foot Si was not deceived by this pretense.

"He lets go too easy," was his reflection.

In his next interview with Beth Crawford, Si told her what had happened, and warned her of the difficulties in her path if she persisted.

"Procure me an interview with Migglesie," she said, firmly.

For all he wished to wean her from her project, Six-foot Si had provided everything for her successful continuance in it if she persisted, and so had foreseen this further use of Boggs.

She had her interview, and that night Joe Moran was treated to another visitation from the grave, which effectually quenched the hopes he had sought to encourage in Old-man Crocker's solution of his experience.

To cover the more effectually his plans, Crocker treated Moran coolly, and, satisfied that the skeptic was a bad counselor, Moran did not inform him of the continuance of his persecution.

"But I'll git shut o' this cussed shanty, an' this blasted camp, an' this infernal country; an' I'll take Miss Falmouth along with me," he promised himself, as he fortified his pluck and the ardor of the lover at the bottle.

So that day he set out to their usual rendezvous, resolved to make conquest of Miss Falmouth's heart, and to secure the promise of her hand before their return home.

Let us see how he prosecuted his courtship.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MORAN'S COURTSHIP.

DURING the interval in which he had been acting as Beth's instructor in pistol-practice, a change had taken place in Joe Moran's demeanor when in her presence.

If Beth had had no ulterior object, it would not have been difficult to preserve the formal courtesy with which they set out. But, as Moran was all the while under the influence of the liquor with which Boggs plied him, and as Beth did not seek to check the cropping out of the coarse instincts natural to him, the artificial restraint under which he held himself at first, in awe of her, gradually wore away, and in its place came the familiarity which he would have shown to a woman who was his equal in breeding.

He smoked in her presence as a matter of course, and had left off apologizing when he took a drink from his flask with the plea that he wasn't feeling well.

In furtherance of his amatory hopes, he had even gone so far as to throw out feelers in the form of jesting intimations of his admiration for her. These she had parried as a woman does when she is willing to let it be seen that she is not offended at the liberty.

He had broached the subject of marriage in a general way, and she had expressed herself very positively in favor of money as a prudential consideration.

"I reckon, now," he had ventured, "ef a chap had a bonanza, like the Comstock, fur instance, so's he could go to the States, an' even to Europe, ef he took the notion, an' sport as fly a turn-out as the best of 'em, that thar'd be about your idee, eh?"

"I'll wait until I see the chap with the bonanza," she had replied, carelessly. "Some bonanzas—even the Comstock—would be too heavily handicapped with some chaps that I have seen."

"Oh, a chap as knowed how to handle himself, o' course," he had laughed, a little nervously.

At another time, when on the subject of "the boys," having depreciated them as a "hard crowd," he had added:

"I shouldn't wonder ef a tenderfoot from the States, what had swallered a dictionary ur two, an' had the latest bow an' scrape down to fine dots, would be more to your notion."

"Excuse me!" she had replied, with emphasis. "To suit my taste, a man must be a man, every inch of him, and not to be backed down, if it comes to the point, by the best man that can rise against him."

A sudden pang of jealousy had forced out of him:

"Thar's Dandy Dave, fur instance."

But she had shrugged her shoulders, replying, carelessly:

"He has nerve enough, maybe."

And, by leaving it unsaid, she made the more forcible the implication that he had the fatal defect of being otherwise uninteresting.

All this was said with such off-hand lightness, that the victim of her arts could not suspect that this amatory skirmishing turned her sick with inward disgust, and that when alone she would pace the floor with clenched hands and blazing eyes, execrating him and the despicable part she was playing.

But, immovable in her resolve, she had forced herself to go infinitely further than this.

It was now unusual thing for him when he had accompanied her home, to sit before her door and chat, in the sight of the whole camp, if they chose to look, while she poured the wine which she set before him, and struck the match with which he was to light his cigar.

More than this, she had invited him to dine with her, not even taking the precaution to secure the attendance of one of her own sex, as she probably would have done, but that she subordinated everything to her fixed purpose of revenge, and was planning all with a view to a *dénouement* which she saw in the future.

In the unconventional mining-camp she could do this without suffering in the estimation of the community. It had come to be tacitly accepted that there was an understanding between her and Sam Sutter, and that a wedding might be looked for at no distant day.

As for the women of the camp, they were too much awed by the air of assured dignity, without arrogance, with which she carried herself, to venture to criticise her unfavorably.

So now Moran resolved to bring the matter to an issue.

"I reckon she won't have me with both pockets turned inside out," he mused, "but ef I kin git her to make an agreement ag'in' I make my pile, I'll snatch this hyar thing bald-headed, an' then we'll step off."

He found her at their usual place of rendezvous, but sitting in an attitude of disconsolate listlessness.

When she detected his approach, she made a hasty effort to remove the traces of tears from

her eyes, but as this was now too late, she faced him with a sudden assumption of defiance.

As this was an entirely new manifestation, it disconcerted him not a little, and without stopping to speculate as to the cause of her disturbance, his first impulse was to conciliate her by some show of attention.

Fumbling in his pockets, he stammered:

"I've brung out a new make o' cartridge that Moses has jest got."

"You've taken your time about it!" she replied, with petulance.

Then, before he could say anything further, she turned upon him, and flashed out:

"Look here, Sam Sutter—if you're tired of this thing, I am; and we'll throw it up at once!"

That took his breath away.

"Tired!" he gasped.

"Yes," she persisted, showing, now that she had got started, that she possessed a fine temper.

"Do you think I find it amusing to hang about here by the hour, while you're drinking with Dandy Dave and the rest of them, no doubt?"

"Have I kept you waitin'?" he stammered, at a loss what to say.

"Waiting!" she repeated, with withering scorn. "I should say you had!"

"I didn't mean to. I ain't feelin' well lately," he apologized, humbly.

"You were in better health when I first came to this camp!" she retorted, in a way that was thoroughly feminine.

"I hain't been drinkin' with Dave, anyway—honor bright!" he pleaded.

"It doesn't matter to me whom you have been drinking with! I'm sure I don't see why it should?" she cried, with a contemptuous toss of her head.

Then she hurried on:

"I'm sick and tired of this camp, anyway. I've stayed here longer than I intended to. I'm sure there's nothing here to keep me. And I'm going to get out of it to-morrow!"

"Not to-morrow, Bess!" he pleaded, for they had got so far as to call one another by their given names.

"I don't see why I should stay any longer. This is the roughest place I was ever in, in my life! What companionship have I? Absolutely none! This isn't a proper place for a lady, and you know it."

She spoke as if she held him responsible for all the short-comings of the place. But any one who has been through the ludicrous agonies of this sort of a quarrel will not be surprised at that.

"That's so," admitted Moran, seeing his way to get in a point. "It ain't no place fur your sort, an' it hain't suited me fur to have you hyar from the first. I don't like the place myself, an' I was thinkin' about gittin' quit of it when you come hyar."

Then he made a bold dash, thinking that he might never have a better opening than now.

"Look a-hyar, Bess, my girl, what's the reason me an' you couldn't make it up together, an' clear out o' hyar, both of us! I'm thinkin' as I've been knockin' around loose an' keardless about long enough. This ain't no kind o' livin'. Every man had orter tie up to some good woman, an' settle down to stiddy business. That's what I've been thinkin', an' I'm 'lowin' as I'll never strike your match ag'in nowhar. It ain't much of a ketch fur you, an' that's a fact. But you might git many a man as shows up better on the outside, what wouldn't stand by ye through thick an' thin, as I would. So, ef you're agreeable, we'll call it a go, and say no more about it."

There may have been faults in Joe's eloquence, but he was earnest enough as he made this proposal. Barring a slight unsteadiness induced by the liquor with which he had wrought his courage up to this point, no woman could ask anything more straightforward.

But, recalling a previous occasion, when, in the ardor of a first love, Bob Cady had fairly taken her by storm, Beth was overcome with a sudden faintness, and sinking down upon a bowlder, dropped her face into her lap.

Moran was not a little embarrassed by this reception of his declaration. He was at a loss how to interpret it. He had come to a full stop, and the silence, save for Beth's perturbed breathing, disconcerted him further. Some instinct had deterred him from an allusion to his financial prospects, but, at a loss for something else to say, he was trembling upon an approach to this subject, when the girl suddenly started to her feet.

Beth had time to recover herself, and to resume her mask.

"Sam Sutter," she cried, "do you think that I have led you up to this?"

"No, no," he protested, submissively enough.

"Don't you dare to!" was her fiery prohibition.

"I don't. I done it by myself. I've been thinkin' of it fur a long time."

She was sobbing now, with no pretense of hiding her tears.

It was natural that he should seek to comfort her, and in the way that would first suggest itself to all of us, but she repelled him, crying:

"Don't touch me! You're a pretty one to talk of marriage, aren't you?"

And she fell to crying harder than ever, as if his presumed unfitness were a grievance to her.

"Why not?" asked Moran. "Haven't I eyes in my head? Don't I know that you're a thunderin' sight too good fur me? But I'd be mighty glad to git you all the same!"

"And do you suppose," she cried, passionately, "because I have come to this God-forsaken country for a few weeks' change—and I wish in my soul I had never set eyes on it—that I want to stay in it all my life? A delightful prospect, wouldn't it be, to settle down in a shanty like the one I am putting up with, and drudge for a man who does nothing all day but drink and gamble with such fellows as Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker, and with both pockets inside out from year's end to year's end? I'd see myself shot first!"

This was taking a practical view of the case, surely; but there was implication in her vehemence that set Joe Moran's pulses to tingling.

"An' do you 'low I'd ask you to do that?" he cried.

"It looks a great deal like it!" she retorted.

"Waal, I reckon I know you're worth more'n that. I don't ask you to marry me till I've made my pile."

"Oh, yes! You're looking to break Dandy Dave's bank one of these days! Well, there are a great many more waiting for the same luck."

"I've got a better show than that, or I wouldn't have opened up."

"I'd like to see the show you talk about."

She was gradually softening, and Joe plucked up hope.

"Bess," he asked, earnestly, "do you remember when I asked you how a bonanza like the Comstock, an' a trip to Europe, would suit you, you said 'Fetch on yer banana?'"

"I think I said even a bonanza might be too heavily handicapped!" she replied, with a faint smile.

"With me, Bess?"

"I didn't say that. But we won't talk any more about it. You haven't the bonanza, to begin with."

"Don't be too sure o' that!"

She looked up at him quickly, and then with a faint shrug of the shoulders and a slight curl of her pretty lip, walked away toward where they were in the habit of shooting, saying, with a shade of resentment:

"I wasn't born yesterday!"

"Do ye 'low I'm foolin' ye?" he asked, following her, with a vibration of eagerness in his voice.

"I think, Sam Sutter," she replied, turning full upon him a very bright pair of eyes, "that you are making a mistake when you talk nonsense to me!"

How pretty she looked in her anger, with her delicate nostril dilating and quivering, her head high, her step firm!

"If I show up the bonanza, will you marry me?" he persisted.

"When you are done making game of me," she replied, seemingly at a sudden white heat of anger, "we will begin to shoot, or I will go home. On reflection, that is the better plan, and I will bid you good-morning at once!"

She would have swept past him like an offended queen, but he detained her.

"Honor bright, I have got an interest in a mine what's bound to pan out the biggest kind as soon as I git the things runnin'. Do you reckon, ef I didn't see nothin' ahead but knock-in' about in a camp like this, I'd be fool enough to ask you to tie to me?"

She seemed to be impressed by his earnestness, for she stopped, and regarded him with a close scrutiny.

"Do you mean to say that you're talking seriously, Sam?" she asked.

"I never was talkin' business straighter in all my life!" he protested.

"Where is your mine?"

"Oh, I'll show up the mine fast enough, if you say you'll take it—handicapped, ye onderstand!"

She laughed brightly at his wit, and he added quickly:

"It ain't a go, if I don't put fifty thousand dollars, an' maybe a half dozen times that, in your lap!"

She drew herself up, and took a quick, deep inhalation, with her hands clasping her waist, as if the prospect of such riches took her breath away.

"Is it a go?" he urged.

She turned her eyes full upon him, with a wide-open seriousness.

"I suppose you think me pretty mean-spirited, to think first of all of money," she said. "But I've seen enough of poverty in married life in the case of my friends, not to wish to try it on myself. And I say, if a man can't take care of a wife, he don't deserve to have one."

"That's my own notion, an' as I said before—"

"That isn't all. When a man goes earnestly to work to get a little something together, it shows that he has the ambition to make some-

thing of himself, instead of being content to knock about from pillar to post all his life."

"Waal, you know that minin' is a mighty on-certain business. A man works year out an' year in on grub-stakes, an' then all of a sudden he strikes it rich, an' he's made. I've had my ups an' my downs. I've been skinned out of a fortune twice. But now I've got the cards jest to suit me, an' before I let up on this thing, I 'low to be able to show up with the best of 'em."

"Before I seen you, I 'lowed it 'ud be about the thing to run a camp like this hyar, as Dandy Dave's a-doin'. But o' course that wouldn't be fitten fur the likes o' you, an' I've changed my ideas accordin'. Now I say, ef you'll stand in with me, when I rake my pile, we'll make a dead break fur the States, or any other place you like, an' we'll sling as much style as the next one. Ef you'll say 'Go in, Joe!' it'll put—some—heart—"

The words died on his lips, and he glanced at her quickly and keenly, to see if she noticed his slip of the tongue.

But she turned away with a lightsome air, saying:

"You get your mine to running, and then perhaps we'll talk it over. Meanwhile, suppose we go on with our shooting."

Even so much of a concession put him in greater spirits than he had ever known before, and he hurried after her, and would have thrown his arms about her, but that she quickly lifted her hand to his breast and repelled him, with that frosty reserve which some of her sex affect.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sutter, if you please! It will be time enough for such demonstrations after we have come to a little more definite understanding. Perhaps I have said too much. If it is going to lessen your respect for me—"

"Bess, you know nothin' couldn't do that!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Let us say no more about it."

And he yielded submissively, as we all do.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD-MAN CROCKER ON THE TRIAL.

"PUT this an' that together," said Old-man Crocker, in solitary self-communion, "an' ye drop onto their leetle game! Who is the new men what has struck the camp sence Joe Moran staked out his claim?"

He told them off on his fingers—the Teaser, Bummer Boggs, and a few others who had drifted in and out of the camp as roving spirits constantly do, coming and going nobody knows whence or whither.

There was one stranger who did not occur to him in this connection. No vision of Miss Falmouth so much as rose before his fancy.

"The Teaser!" he said, emphatically. "Who is the Teaser? What does he want hyar? He's got the gall an' the savy to run this hyar thing, an' he's the only one that has. He could play Boggs in a game what Boggs hain't got the git-up to go into alone. I reckon it was the Teaser what put this hyar knob on my topknot. Waal, I owe him one fur that! I reckon I'll fall in behind the Teaser, an' see what he's up to, anyway."

With this resolve he began a subtle espionage.

"To begin with, I want to spot them as is standin' in with his lordship."

And from that moment the Teaser did not exchange a glance with any one, that Old-man Crocker did not note and weigh.

He was not long in running upon proof that his suspicions were not altogether groundless. He discovered that the Teaser was spying upon Sam Sutter's courtship.

"Aha! that don't suit him!" he muttered.

"Waal, he'll have somethin' else sour on his stomach before he gits through with this thing!"

Still he did not suspect Miss Falmouth as having any part in the machinations against Joe Moran.

He next set himself to observing every stranger that came to the camp.

"They'll be gittin' word to him," he reflected. "They've been playin' Moran so fur, but the next round they'll set up the pins fur to bowl him out. An' jest about the time they git ready fur a ten-strike, bet yer sweet life they find out that thar's an old hand on that alley!"

This, too, was productive of almost immediate results.

Within twenty-four hours a new man put in an appearance, and proceeded to take in the camp quietly.

The moment Six-foot Si saw him, he recognized another of Hank Budlong's gang.

"A new patient fur my 'sylum!' he mused, and prepared to "take the stranger in."

But Old-man Crocker detected Si's look of interest.

"So! hyar's number one! He plays off harnsome, don't he?"

This mistaken compliment was called forth by the fact that the new-comer evinced no especial interest in the Teaser. Of course, it was because he did not know him.

But when he espied Sam Sutter, on his return with Miss Falmouth, his countenance betrayed a very lively interest, indeed, coupled with intense hatred.

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Old-man Crocker. "He don't play off so handy whar he's got a spite."

However, the outlaw spy slunk away so that he had no chance to see him, and at the approach of darkness stole out of the camp on his way to report to his chief.

He was followed by Six-foot Si, while Old-man Crocker brought up the rear, unsuspected by either of those who went before.

But what was his surprise to see what took place on the road!

Six-foot Si managed to overtake the spy at a bend in the road, so that he was almost directly upon him before his vicinity was discovered.

The outlaw paused, and looked disconcerted, casting about as if for some avenue of escape.

But it was too late to attempt such a thing, without the certainty of discovery, and the chance of awakening suspicion that might prove inconvenient in the future.

"Hallo, stranger!" was Six-foot Si's hearty salute. "If we're goin' the same way, I don't see why we shouldn't shorten the distance by Paddy's rule—each of us walk half of it."

"I ain't goin' only to the next camp," replied the outlaw, rather surlily.

"Waal, I reckon I'll keep on as long as the moon's up," said Si. "It's better'n walkin' in the sun. If I hadn't been cleaned out lately, I'd have a hoss under me."

This was said with a frank communicative-ness well calculated to win confidence.

"Ef you've got a pipe about ye," pursued Si, cordially, "I've got some Al 'bacca, an' we'll smoke together. Ef you hain't, we'll take turns at my ole stan'-by, ef you've a notion that way."

"I've got a pipe somewhar about my clo's, an' I will thank ye fur a load," replied the outlaw, making the best of the situation.

"That's all right, so fur," reflected Old-man Crocker. "I reckon they ain't sure o' one another."

Six-foot Si and the stranger filled and lighted their pipes, and walked on, chatting as chance acquaintances will, save that the outlaw was not thoroughly at his ease.

You would have thought that Si had nothing on his mind other than what happened to strike his fancy in their surroundings, or in the topics of current interest to miners.

But Old-man Crocker gradually became puzzled at this demeanor. The thing didn't work as he had anticipated.

"What air they up to, anyway?" he mused. "Why don't they come to the pint? They're mighty skeery of one another."

But it presently transpired that Old-man Crocker was altogether out in his calculations, for, all of a sudden, without the slightest warning, Six-foot Si seized the stranger, tripped up his heels, and flung him to the ground, with the same skill that he had shown in handling Harri-gan and the Bouncer.

"Great Caesar! what does that mean?" cried Old-man Crocker, under his breath.

The outlaw was equally astonished.

"Curse you, what air you up to?" he grated between his clinched teeth, as he struggled with savage but futile desperation to liberate himself from his captor's iron clutch.

Him alone Six-foot Si answered, unaware of Old-man Crocker's interest in the matter.

"I'm takin' in an' doin' fur Hank Budlong's gang, Johnny!" replied Si, coolly. "I've got you, pard, an' I don't want nary peep out o' you, or I'll cut off yer wind."

"What air you 'lowin' fur to do with me, I want to know?"

"No hurt, unless Judge Lynch takes a notion to give you a leave of absence after I git through with ye. I've got the rest o' your crowd, so you'll have company."

He had disarmed his man, and was now tying him securely, with a rope which he had evidently prepared for this purpose.

Resistance was useless, and the chance of attracting help in that lonely mountain road was altogether too slender to tempt the captive to make any outcry while in the clutches of so determined a man as Six-foot Si proved himself to be.

So the fellow availed himself of the one privilege that was left him, and proceeded to gratify his curiosity.

"You've got the rest o' the boys, ye say?"

"You bet I have."

"Slippery Pete, an' Jimmy Kenney, an' Lal Burgess, an' Topeka Ted, an'—"

"I've got 'em all, Johnny, an' I'll corral the rest before I'm done."

"Then you're stan'in' in with Joe Moran, boss? We 'lowed that the boys had sold us out."

"You'll know more about it before you git out o' this scrape. Now, ef you'll walk along stiddy an' easy, you an' me won't have no fallin' out."

"I ain't makin' no trouble, pard. But, say! who be you, anyway?"

"You'll find that out, maybe, one o' these days, ef you don't run up a tree by accident. But who aire you?"

"I hain't no call fur no blind about myself. I'm Jake Foraker. An' ef you want to know more about Jake Foraker, I reckon Hank Bud-

long will say as he hain't got many better men."

"He won't have many ef he keeps sendin' of 'em to Bloody Run. That's mighty onhealthy place fur to go nosin' around in. An' that reminds me—how many has he of ye, altogether?"

"As fast as you git 'em, you kin keep tally, boss!" replied Jake Foraker, with a wink.

It was plain that he didn't intend to give anything away.

"You needn't be so fly," retorted Six-foot Si. "I've had the chance to count the lot of ye, an' I've got you all down in a rogues' gallery what I carry about in my eye, so's I kin spot ye as fast as ye turn up. Hain't I pulled in every one you've sent to Bloody Run?"

"You have so!" admitted Foraker. "But, say, pard, was it you that sneaked into our rendezvous up to the Serpentine?"

"What makes you think I did?"

"Why, Jimmy Kenney must 'a' stood in with you thar. It wasn't in him to git away with Billy Maddern like he did, without somebody to coach him. I'll bet you bought him up cheap."

Si laughed.

"When you see him, he'll tell you it was a dead give-away. He toted me out o' thar on his back."

"You don't say!"

"Oh, you'd 'a' done it too, with the same persuadin'."

That set Jake to thinking, an employment for which he had all the more leisure, when Six-foot Si bandaged his eyes and suggested that he give his chin a rest.

The whole proceeding was food for reflection to Old-man Crocker, who found that he would have to rearrange all of his ideas, to make them conform to this new development.

"He's in with Moran, an' ag'in' the crowd that's layin' fur him! Then what game is Moran up to, not lettin' on about him? An' ef he's in with Moran, who's in with Bummer Boggs, what's ag'in' Moran? Who give me that rap on the knowledge-box, I want to know?"

The more he thought of it, the more intricate this problem became, until he was fain to give it up, and wait for discoveries which might arise out of his present investigation to throw light on the subject.

So he followed the Teaser and his prisoner deep into the mountain fastnesses, until they came to a rocky gorge, where captor and captive entered a hole in the face of a cliff, so hidden by rocks and vines that it could be discovered only by accident, when one happened to stumble upon it.

"So this is the corral he was talkin' about," reflected Old-man Crocker, secreting himself to await the Teaser's reappearance. "Waal, it ain't so bad. But I shouldn't wonder ef thar'd be a stampede of his cattle before he gits a herd big enough to put on the trail."

And he chuckled to himself, reflecting on the "leetle game" he was about to play on the man who, he yet half-believed, had laid him out so cleverly a few nights before.

He had not long to wait, for in a quarter of an hour the Teaser came out alone, and strode away on his return to Bloody Run, at a pace which showed that his only anxiety was to get back to camp before daybreak.

Old-man Crocker followed him for some distance, to make sure that he would be in no danger of his return at an awkward juncture, and went back to the prison cave.

It required not a little nerve to venture into that cavern alone, ignorant of what he might come upon. Capture, death itself might await him, and none of his friends would ever know what had become of him.

But Old-man Crocker was as nearly insensible to physical fear as a man could well be. To him all of life was very like a game of cards, played on the principle of "nothing venture, nothing gain."

When had he hesitated to take his life in his hand, if the prosecution of his purposes required it? He could remember no such weakness.

At the same time, he knew what were fair precautions, and he did not propose to put himself up as a target without his having a show.

So now he secured two torches of fat pine, thrust one through his belt at his back, and lighting the other and carrying it in his left hand, while his right held his trusty revolver in readiness for any emergency, ventured warily into the cave.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLD VENTURE.

TRAVERSING the first corridor, Old-man Crocker came to an inner chamber where he was arrested by a sound that would have brought most men's hearts into their mouths.

It sounded like a distant howl, muffled by the vaulted rocks.

Waving his torch above his head, Old-man Crocker examined on every side the chamber in which he stood, but discerned nothing that indicated that the cave had ever been visited by man.

"He's got lots o' room in yon," muttered the intruder, "an' he ain't givin' himself away by hangin' a sign-board out in front of his house."

"Thar's plenty o' chance to knock at the wrong door," he pursued, scanning the several corridors leading from the chamber. "An' by the same token, it 'u'd be a mighty easy thing to git lost in hyar. So I reckon I'd better begin by puttin' a blaze on the way out."

In pursuance of this wise precaution, he proceeded to smudge the side of the corridor by which he had entered.

"An' now I reckon that thar howlin', whatever it is, will be as good a guide as I'll git to find my way in to whar he keeps his menagerie."

He went to first one corridor and then another, and listened until he found the one through which the sound came. Down this he then proceeded, with even more caution than before.

"Hoo-oo-oo!" came the howl, growing louder as he advanced.

"What in Cain is it?" he muttered, in perplexity. "He must 'a' kept some o' them chaps in hyar until they've gone crazy. This is a high ole bedlam, now ain't it?"

But his speculations were brought to a very abrupt close, for at this point he came to where he could see into a second chamber, where he discovered not only a light, but a tenant as well.

It was the tenant that chiefly occupied his attention, and well he might, for a more forbidding customer in appearance no one need to encounter under such circumstances.

Dimijohn was no beauty in broad daylight. In the blood-red illumination of a smoking torch in this abode of darkness, he looked like the—Well, to "draw it mild," he was suggestive of one of those hobgoblins that haunted mediæval fancy.

However, he seemed to be a good-natured gnome, for, after the first look of surprise, he grinned a welcome that would have frightened children out of their wits, but which, in fact, was the best he could do to express a cordial greeting.

"Who in Cain air you?" demanded Old-man Crocker, his iron nerves not a whit disturbed.

The familiar of the cavern was a man, albeit of not prepossessing appearance, but still only a man, and, lastly, a man on whom he "held the drop." That was enough for Old-man Crocker.

Dimijohn grinned and bowed, as if he anticipated no trouble as soon as an understanding was established between them, and going to a niche in the wall, took from it a piece of paper which he brought forward to present to his frowning visitor.

"None o' yer tricks, my covey!" growled Crocker, who was suspicious of this extreme civility, accompanied by what he called "dummy business."

"Halt!"—and his threatening weapon made this command understood, even if it was not heard.

Dimijohn stopped, and indicated by animated gesticulation that he was misjudged. He was unarmed. He was the bearer of a message which would make all right.

"Put it down thar," commanded Old-man Crocker, indicating a ledge of rock too distant for the dwarf to make a treacherous leap for him from that point.

Dimijohn complied with the most cheerful readiness.

"Now, you git!"—and this was made intelligible to him, if indeed he was deaf, by a wave of the ready revolver.

With a shrug of the shoulders which implied that these precautions, while justified, were needless, Dimijohn retired, to await the examination of the paper which was to allay all suspicions.

Old-man Crocker advanced, picked up the paper, and saw that it was traced with characters which conveyed no intelligence to his mind. The writing was in the ordinary English script, but the letters had not their usual value.

"A blind," he said. "What the dickens am I to make o' this hyar? That dummy seems to think it's all right, though. Reckon he takes me fur somebody else."

He glanced up at Dimijohn, who stood grinning at him expectantly.

"Suppose I play off on him?" mused Crocker. "I kin see what he's got hyar, anyway. An' ef thar's anythin' 'sides about it, it'll be queer ef I can't git away with him."

Old-man Crocker was a person of prompt decision. He thought he saw his way clear, and he acted at once.

Tossing the paper aside as if it were of no further value, now that he had read it, he smiled and nodded, and waved his revolver toward the inner chambers, to indicate that he wished to be shown through the place.

This seemed to be the result which the dwarf expected, and taking a torch from the niche in the wall, he trudged off in advance.

"But I ain't goin' nothin' blind," mused Old-man Crocker, shrewdly. "It looks fair enough, but thar may be a nigger in the fence fur all that. I'm keepin' track o' the way out o' hyar, ye understand!"

And he took the precaution to smudge the mouth of the corridor, as before.

When he reached the third chamber, he could make out that the howling he had heard before was a monotonous repetition of the hail.

"Hallo!"

"This hyar's bedlam, sure!" he reflected, stopping and listening.

And truly nothing could be more weird than that senseless interchange, echoing through the hollow vaults of these subterranean chambers.

But as soon as the light of the torches borne by Old-man Crocker and his guide was visible, the prisoners ceased their communication with one another, and simultaneously burst into a torrent of bitter execration.

"Waal, I swar!" cried Old-man Crocker, listening in astonishment. "Ef this hyar ain't jest one sweet menagerie! It's lucky fur that dummy that he's deaf. I've hyeared some sw'arin' before in my time, but it never seemed to sound quite so bad. Yon galoot has kept the boys in hyar till they're handkerin' fur a change. Waal, they'll git it before they're much older."

To all this Dimijohn was evidently oblivious, as he grinned over his shoulder and waved his torch to direct the eye about the chamber which they now entered.

Out of it in several directions ramified corridors through which came the blasphemous salute which had greeted their approach.

Looking down them, Old-man Crocker could see nothing but their blackness, but, standing in the light, he was plainly visible to two of the prisoners who could look through comparatively straight corridors.

At sight of him, they at once left off their swearing, and one of them greeted him eagerly:

"I say, pardner! have you come fur to let us out o' this hyar? Fur God's sake, don't leave us no longer with that thar grinnin' devil!"

Dimijohn, not heeding this petitioner, went to one whose prison cell opened directly into the chamber in which they stood, and holding his torch so that Old-man Crocker could see the white face and gleaming eyes through the interstices of the rocky barricade, turned to him with a nod and a grin, as if he thought he was showing him only what the paper had already apprised him of.

Never was a possible deliverer scanned with more anxious eyes than those that now tried to read Old-man Crocker's face.

"Waal, pard," said Crocker, "you're in a purty bad fix, ain't ye?"

"Bad!" was the tremulous response. "Stranger, air you in with this hyar image an' yon galoot what put us in this hole?"

"Who air you, an' what air you in hyar fur?" asked Old-man Crocker, waiving the other's question, as he saw a chance to get some light on the situation which puzzled him.

The prisoner—who was none other than our friend Jimmy Kenney—hesitated.

Would the truth, or a lie, serve him best? If this stranger was an honest man, affiliation with neither Hank Budlong nor Joe Moran would be a recommendation to his favor.

Again, if he was not "standing in" with the master of this place—and his question seemed to indicate that he was not in his confidence—how came it that he was being shown about thus freely?

Sore puzzled, and fearing that he would "put his foot in it" either way, Jimmy Kenney followed his native bent. A "natural born" liar always believes that he can invent something better than the truth. But, to one versed in such things, he "gave himself away," by beginning to bolster up his word at the outset.

"I'll tell ye the Lord's truth, boss. My name is Jimmy—Jimmy—Kavanaugh."

He stumbled over the name, because the advisability of making a complete change in his identity occurred to him just as he got to it.

"I've been knockin' around up north o' hyar, but as thar wa'n't nothin' doin', an' I hyeared as how thar was prospects down this way, I 'lowed to try my luck. An' blamed hard luck it has been, you bet!—fur the minute I struck this hyar section, a chap what I don't know from a side o' sole-leather clapped onto me, an' chucked me in hyar, an' I hain't seen the light o' day sense! That's nigh on to two month ago, I reckon. 'Pears like it was a year! An' that's the good Lord's truth, every word of it."

"But what would a man what you didn't know, an' what didn't know you, house you in hyar fur, whar you ain't worth yer keep to nobody?"

"That's jest what I want to know. I told him who I was, an' stood fur to know what he was jumpin' of me fur. But he 'lowed as he wasn't a bureau o' ginerel information, an' I'd find out before I got through with it. I reckon he took me fur somebody else, but he wouldn't hear to nothin'."

"An' now, boss, ef fur the love o' God you'll git me out o' hyar. I'll do anythin' in the world fur you, ag'in' I git a show."

This appeal was made very pathetically, for Jimmy was pretty well broken down by his incarceration. But it didn't "wash" with Old-man Crocker.

"Waal, you're a purty toler'ble liar," he said, with matter-of-fact coolness, "but you don't git away with yer uncle. When I want to hyear more out o' you, I'll call ag'in'."

And he turned away without more ado, signing to Dimijohn to go on to the next.

The dwarf grinned and nodded, with the utmost compliance.

So apparent was it from his whole demeanor, that he took his visitor for some one else, for whom his master had left a message, that Old-man Crocker proceeded to play the role at his ease.

But the prisoner was calling after him.

"Boss! boss! fur the love o' God, don't leave me! Hold on, pard! I'll give it to ye straight! I'll do anythin' you say! Oh, fur God's sake, have some pity on a poor devil what ain't got a friend in the world! I say, boss, hold on! ho-o-old on! ho-o-old on!"

He was clinging to the rocky barrier, and fairly howling through the aperture through which he stated at the receding figures that were his only link with the upper world of light and life. Tears streamed from his eyes, and his voice was hoarse and broken with distress.

But Old-man Crocker paid not the slightest heed, any more then if, like Dimijohn, he could not hear him.

What to him was this shrieking wretch?

"He'll bluff me ag'in—when he gits the show!"

Dimijohn next exhibited Lal Burgess, who was even more broken than Jimmy Kenney.

How anxiously he scanned the forbidding face, the unrelenting frown, the hard eyes that regarded him coldly.

He dared not speak, lest his tremulous plea should offend.

But his panting breath, his quivering lips, the pathetic wistfulness of his eyes, like those of a famishing man within sight of bread that may be withdrawn if he betray too great an eagerness, were eloquent of his misery, of the wavering hope of deliverance.

"Waal, you don't seem to enjoy it much in hyar," was Old-man Crocker's rough salute.

"I wouldn't be hyar ef I could help it, boss. You know that!"

"How did you come hyar, then?"

"I was dropped onto, an' held up, like many a better man."

"Who dropped onto you?"

"That I don't know, stranger."

"H'm! Strikes me you're a mighty unknown set in hyar."

"I hain't seen none o' the rest but Topeka Ted."

"An' who's Topeka Ted?"

"That's my pard. I reckon he's in hyar some'rs."

"An' you two was corraled together?"

"We was, so."

"By one man?"

"He got the drop on us"—apologetically.

"Now, who be you, anyway, an' who is this galoot what's runnin' this hyar private jail, all on his own hook?"

"Ted an' me is Hank Budlong's men, an' I reckon the chap as pocketed us is standin' in with Joe Moran."

"An' who is Hank Budlong?"

"Waal, ye see, Hank Budlong, he's the chief cook an' bottle-washer of a leetle squad of us boys, an' he hired us out to Joe Moran fur to git some papers what Moran was after, 'lowin' as we was to git a good thing out of a mine what Joe said was in the wind. Then Joe, when he gits them papers, he gives us the dirty shake an' skips, an' we've been layin' fur him, an' 'lowin' fur to take it out o' his hide when we flush him out o' cover."

"Oho! So you're ag'in' Moran, air ye?"

"Ye-es"—with a hesitation induced by Old-man Crocker's manner.

"Waal, then this hyar's about as good a place fur you as any I know of."

And without more ado Crocker turned upon his heel.

But this very contemptuous indifference to the suffering of others, was the snare by which he allowed himself to be entrapped, for his brutal instinct to "walk over" this helpless wretch rough-shod, made him for the moment forgetful of his early suspicion of his misshapen guide.

His back was turned but an instant, but in that instant he heard a slight crash, as Dimijohn's torch fell to the floor of the cavern, and before he had time to look round, the body of the dwarf was precipitated upon him, as a cougar drops upon its prey from the limb of a tree overhead.

By the impetus of the rush he was borne to the ground, dropping his torch to clutch his antagonist, so that they were left in total darkness.

From sheer excitement, so unstrung were his nerves by his horrible confinement, Lal Burgess uttered a howl of dismay, but the two contestants fought in silence, broken only by their hard-drawn breath, and an occasional snarl like that of wild beasts.

Clutching the rocks that shut him in, staring into the darkness, straining his ears to interpret the dull thuds that told of cruel blows given and received, the prisoner sought to follow the struggle, in vain.

When the cessation of those fierce sounds announced that one concentration of brute force had succumbed, he knew not with whom lay victory, with whom defeat.

But presently he heard the shuffling noise of a

heavy body being dragged over the ground. It receded, waned, was swallowed up by the horrible cavern, and silence and darkness lay like an ebon pall over all.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

OUT in the mountain solitudes sat a man on a bowlder, with his foot upon a smaller rock, his elbow on his knee, his cheek supported by his hand, his brows knit in a frown of gloomy meditation.

About him stood four or five others, in various attitudes of dejection.

The first was Hank Budlong. The last were what were left of his men.

The time was night, and the moonlight, casting parts of their faces in dense shadow, exaggerated the expression of gloomy bitterness.

The disappointed leader lifted his eyes, and glanced around on this disconsolate remnant of his once formidable band of mountain outlaws.

"Waal, boys," he said, "what's the word?"

"We're allowin'," replied Billy Maddern, with an air which showed that he was acting as spokesman for his companions by pre-arrangement, "as this hyar ain't a very takin' deal, so fur."

"Pears like Moran was bound to be too many for us."

"Air you agreed to let it go at that?"

"He has a mighty takin' way with him. He's gobbled up our best men—"

"Not our best men, Bill."

"Waal, he's bought in enough in number so ef he'd turn only our own ag'in' us, he could bite us off at one chaw, an' throw us away."

Hank Budlong frowned gloomily, and after a pause, asked abruptly:

"What do you 'low, now, he wants with the very men he's throwed off on?"

"Don't he want 'em ef he's got to take 'em?" asked Maddern, as if this was clear enough.

"Suppose," suggested Budlong dryly, "we make him take the lot of us? We'd be jest whar we was before, wouldn't we?"

Maddern dropped his jaw, and all the others showed by their blank looks that this was an entirely new proposition to them.

"I reckon he ain't up to that leetle game," ventured Maddern at last.

"I reckon not," corroborated Budlong.

"What is he up to, then?" asked Maddern, curious to know what was in his leader's mind.

"Whatever it is," answered the outlaw chief, "you may bet yer sweet life you hain't dropped to him yet."

"What's your idea?"

"It's my idee as he hain't bought in nary one of 'em."

"Whar be they, then? What's become of 'em—the best part of our gang?"

"Suppose he's put 'em out o' the way?"

A dead silence fell upon the crowd.

This was the thought that led the boys at last to make a stand against further proceedings until they thoroughly canvassed the matter.

In the silence one of them said, scarcely above his breath, but all the more impressively because of the hush:

"One by one!"

"Thar's another queer feature in this thing," added Budlong.

"What's that, Cap?" asked Maddern, nervously.

"A good many—all the last—has passed out in about the same neighborhood."

This, too, the boys had remarked, and discussed among themselves.

But now Billy Maddern rallied against this weight of evidence.

"Hold on, Cap! He bought in one, at least—cuss him!"

"An' who was that?"

"Jimmy Kenney."

"Maybe so."

"But Jimmy rung in a cold deal on me."

"With the point of a bowie at his throat, I reckon Jimmy Kenney would do almost anythin'."

This was a new interpretation to that night's work, which was a source of especial irritation to its victim.

"Cap, do you believe that?" he asked, eagerly.

"I don't believe anythin'," answered Budlong, "until I find out. An' that," he added, rising resolutely, "is what I 'low to do."

"What's the move now?" asked Maddern.

"Boys," said their leader, "we've been playin' this hyar game like a lot o' flats. We've got a long-headed rooster ag'in' us, an' he's been a-playin' his keards fur all they was worth. Whenever we've made a fool play he's picked us up an' got away with us like smoke. Now we've got to match him at his own game. It's science as wins, an' slight."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose to send another man up to Bloody Run."

This was the lion's mouth into which every one had disappeared.

The men stood silent, aghast. No one could with any comfort think of himself as undertaking this dangerous mission. No one volunteered.

"Cap," ventured Maddern, at last, slowly, "I hain't spoke all my mind, an' the mind o' the boys on this hyar p'int yit."

"Spit 'er out, then."

"'Lowin' Joe Moran is up to Bloody Run."

"Waal?"

"You know what sort of a place that thar is."

"About as tough as they make 'em."

"A mighty good place to have friends, an' a mighty bad place fur to have enemies!"

"What's that to us?"

"'Lowin' as the camp is standin' in with Joe Moran."

"An' we've got to buck ag'in' the hull crowd?"

"An' be gobbled up the minute ary one of us shows his nose thar!"

"Is that what you're 'lowin'?"

"We're 'lowin', Cap," replied Maddern, dropping his voice impressively, "as a healthy slice out of our crowd has been run up a tree!"

"Gammon!" scoffed Budlong.

"Whar be they?" demanded Maddern.

"But that couldn't happen, without makin' a noise. Our boys ain't the only ones as goes into Bloody Run. The thing 'u'd be talked about."

"Would it, though? What's the reason the thing couldn't be done on the sly? Hyar comes a stranger. Joe Moran gives 'em the wink. They jumps on him. He don't give it away!"

Nothing could be more startling than this summary delineation of a scene of treachery and murder, accompanied by a pantomime fairly blood-curdling in its fiendish ferocity.

The boys stood awe-struck.

Budlong saw that he would have some difficulty in overcoming the effect of this speech.

However, the man he wanted was the maker of the speech, and there was a chance that he might not be so much impressed by his own performance as the rest were.

"Maddern," he said, abruptly, "air you afeard to go into Bloody Run?"

Maddern flushed fiery red at this challenge.

No man likes to admit that he is really afraid of anything, no matter how justifiable such fear may be, and Maddern was as sensitive on this point as any man who ever rushed upon a foolhardy death, or committed murder under the name of the duello, to prove that he was not a coward.

For a moment Maddern stood at a loss how to parry this thrust, and yet retain the respect of the men who fixed their eyes upon him to see how he would decide the issue.

His figure swelled out, his nostrils quivered, his eyes kindled. At last he replied:

"I 'low not to be afeard o' no one man, nor no two men, ef I have a show, but when it comes to buckin' ag'in' a hull camp, it's a blasted fool as don't cave!"

This was so fair a proposition, that the men showed by their faces that they acceded to it.

Maddern had cleverly "saved his bacon" so far.

But his chief followed him up sharply.

"Air you afeard to go into Bloody Run," he asked, "ef I go along with ye?"

"What?" cried Maddern, in astonishment.

"Air you afeard to go into Bloody Run," repeated Budlong, doggedly, "ef I go along with ye?"

"No I ain't!" cried Maddern.

And he drew himself up with an air which showed that he "lowed not to be stumped by ary man livin'!"

"We'll go thar to-morrer," said Budlong, quietly.

But when, later, at a private interview in which they perfected their arrangements, it appeared that Budlong wished to go so securely disguised that his detection would be almost impossible, while he purposely left his subordinate open to recognition, Maddern demurred with the indignation of a man who felt that he had been tricked into a false position.

Budlong rejoined sternly:

"Do you 'low as I'm playin' boy at this thing, givin' you a resk what I'm afeard to take myself?"

Maddern did not admit that this was the way the thing looked to him, but he awaited further explanation with a frown of dogged suspicion.

"I want to git my men back—that's what I'm after," pursued Budlong. "How kin I do that ef I don't find out what's become of 'em? I've got to throw a bait to Moran, an' then trail him down fine, an' see what he does with it. Ef he offers to buy you, you sell, an' you bet I'll be at your heels. Then, ef our fellers has really sold us out, I'll work this racket so's they'll see what it is to get badly left."

"But suppose they've gone up a tree?"

"You said you wasn't afeard o' no one man."

"No more I ain't."

"Very well, then—you take your chances o' that."

"An' do you sw'ar you'll take a hand ef more'n one jumps me?"

"I'll do that ef I have to tackle the hull camp!"

Hank Budlong's words sounded like bluster, but he spoke with such a cold positiveness that Maddern was satisfied that he meant what he said.

"Good enough!" was Maddern's final acceptance.

On the following morning Hank Budlong entered Bloody Run on foot, with the kit of a prospector slung to his back, his whole aspect that of a man who had been on grub-stakes until the last "angel" had "shook" him as an unlucky speculation.

So good was his make-up and so excellent his acting, that Six-foot Si did not "drop" to him.

Later, however, he "spotted" Bill Maddern, who came in a coach, in the character of a sport.

Billy's "dodge" was the indolent looker-on. He wasn't taking a hand.

He was surprised at the freedom with which Joe Moran lived in the camp, apparently not at all on his guard against strangers, since he did not give Maddern a second glance.

"The fool has taken to drink, an' is goin' all to pieces. What's the matter with him?" was Maddern's wondering speculation.

The fact was that, free so long from interference by the men whom alone, he supposed, he had reason to fear, Joe had almost forgotten them.

On the other hand, the bottle seemed to be his only recourse from the haunting specter of his dead partner.

Lastly, he was engrossed in his pursuit of Miss Falmouth.

With the establishment of the tacit understanding between them, his intimacy with her increased, so that he was permitted to visit her shanty with a freedom that would have surprised even him, had not his mind been so distracted.

It had its effect on the spectators of this little drama. The boys at first chaffed Joe with sly hints, and finally with half-sneering innuendoes, until one of them barely slid out of a personal encounter with him, Joe manifesting a spirit which showed that he was a bad man to "wake up."

Then they began to look askance at Beth. They lifted their hats to her and stood uncovered until she passed with a less marked diffidence.

One stared at her in sullen insolence. One looked after her with a covert smile. One swore in her hearing, and was not reprov'd by his fellows. One failed to see her under circumstances in which he would not have so failed a little while before.

No woman could be insensible to this change. To Beth Crawford, who from her girlhood had been used to the utmost consideration from everybody by whom she was surrounded, this was the bitterest sacrifice she had had to make to her revenge. But she set her teeth like iron.

"All! all!" she said to herself, in fierce determination. "What is the opinion of the world to me? Nothing shall deter me, until I have rid the earth of the vile wretch!"

Meanwhile, she was destroying herself, physically as well as mentally.

To affect the arts of a coquette while her heart burned with hatred and sickened with disgust, was such a strain upon her, that at night, when she was free to be herself, she either raved in self-abandonment, or lay in utter exhaustion.

She grew so gaunt and wild-eyed, that Moran must have realized that so terrible an effect could not spring from ordinary causes, had he not been half stupefied by liquor all the while.

He believed that her capricious temper, which she could not wholly control, was due to a conflict between her love for him and her doubts that he would ever make of himself the rich man he promised her.

This was a subject of repeated discussion between them, in which she sought to goad him into a betrayal of the real basis of his expectations—the cryptogram, to gain which he had imbued his hands in her lover's blood.

Drunk as he was, and as conscienceless himself, he yet retained a dim perception of the superior nature of the woman with whom he had to deal, which told him that it would not do to let her know the blood-stained source of the wealth he was to offer her.

So the terrible struggle went on, and Six-foot Si, a dumb witness of it all, was as great a sufferer as any one concerned.

Not a shade of change in the manner of the boys escaped his jealous eye, and a hundred times he was on the verge of shooting some offender in his tracks, without a word of explanation or warning.

But he waited, and waited, and waited! It seemed an eternity of anguish, but no murmur passed his iron-locked lips.

Of all that saw him daily, but one suspected that anything unusual was going on in his soul.

Dandy Dave had his eye upon him in secret vigilance, yet so carefully did this hero guard every avenue by which he might betray himself, that the watcher never saw a glance at Miss Falmouth which would justify the suspicion that the lady had anything to do with his relations with Moran.

In this state of affairs, Old-man Crocker had suddenly disappeared, throwing the camp into a fever of wondering speculation.

Not a word had he said to the most intimate of his friends—the jackals who did his bidding, and snarled at better men under the cover of

his protection—preparing them for any such absence. Not a thing in his shanty had been touched, indicating a preparation for departure or prolonged stay. If the earth had unexpectedly opened and swallowed him up, he could not more unaccountably have vanished.

An attempt at organized search was made. But where should the searchers look? Not a clew was found.

But one man in the camp felt with anxiety that this mysterious disappearance might be deliberate, the carrying out of a secret scheme.

Six-foot Si was made uneasy by it. He knew Crocker to be a crafty man, with a bull-dog pertinacity of purpose where his hatred had been aroused. He feared that he had not quietly accepted that stunning blow on the head, and the escape out of his clutches of Bummer Boggs.

"Suppose he has been layin' fur us?" meditated Si. "He may drop onto Boggs at any time. An' when he does drop, he may not show his hand. He knows that thar's more in it than Boggs, an' he'll naterally lay fur the king-pin. Ef he ketches me, that won't be so bad. But what ef he ketches her?"

This was the man through and through. At any moment he might receive an assassin's shot in the back, but his first and only thought was for the woman he had undertaken to extricate from difficulties that grew more and more perplexed, with every day, almost every hour, that passed.

One of the greatest dangers that rose before Si's haunted imagination, was that Old-man Crocker might trail him to his prison-house, and liberating his captives, bring them down upon him in a body.

He was on the verge of going to the cave, to assure himself that all was safe, when Billy Maddern appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SLIPPERY CUSTOMER.

BILLY MADDERN had prepared himself for general suspicion, which might at any moment burst into open hostilities, from which neither he nor Hank Budlong—if the latter stood to his promise—might come forth alive. Yet, with the dogged hardihood which distinguishes men of his class, he had, rather than "take water," walked into what he believed to be a death-trap which had already swallowed up most of his comrades, resolved only to "mow a swath about him" that would make a name for the heroic annals of that wild country.

What were his surprise and chagrin to find that, to all appearances, he passed wholly unnoticed. Joe Moran was as little on his guard as if he had not an enemy in the world, and there was not the slightest sign of his having any particular adherents, or being in any way the subject of special attention in the community in which he had taken refuge.

Six-foot Si was far too clever to betray himself to his intended victim, but he failed to provide against the contingency of his being in turn under espionage.

So, while Billy Maddern "spotted" Joe Moran, and was himself "shadowed" by Six-foot Si, Hank Budlong had little difficulty in "dropping to" the new hand in the game.

All unsuspecting of the queue he was dragging after him, Joe Moran went to his accustomed meeting with Miss Falmouth.

Billy Maddern saw his confederate, but was too well trained to attempt to exchange a glance of intelligence with him. He conceived the plan of following Moran, and, if he was given the chance, of capturing him, knowing that Budlong would be at hand to second his efforts if the scheme proved feasible.

Six-foot Si saw his chance to bite the would-be biter.

Hank Budlong brought up the rear, having marked out a line of play that might have disturbed Billy Maddern's confidence, if he had been advised of it.

The meeting between Joe Moran and Beth Crawford took place. Instead of entering at once upon their pistol-practice, they proceeded to stroll slowly side by side.

Maddern saw them approaching him. He had not counted upon the presence of a woman, who would make his meditated capture somewhat more difficult. So he fell back, to a meeting, if possible, with his confederate, all unsuspecting that a foe, far more to be dreaded than even so resolute-looking a woman as Beth Crawford, crouched behind a clump of bushes to intercept his retreat.

He passed this point in a stooping posture, glancing over his shoulder so as to keep some screening object between him and the man he was dogging.

All of a sudden he was borne to the ground, with his arms pinioned so that he could not draw a weapon.

The struggle that ensued was terrific. Not a sound escaped either contestants. Beth Crawford and her companion, who were easily within sound of their voices, had they raised them, knew nothing of it. Hank Budlong knew, but it was not his cue to interfere.

Billy Maddern now proved his metal. Knowing that he could summon assistance, he yet re-

frained, though the struggle went against him, with nothing in prospect but an unknown death.

The agreement had been that his comrade should back him if he was attacked by more than one foe. There was but one. If Budlong did not choose to come to his aid he disdained to "squeal."

Six-foot Si's whole aim was to secure his prisoner without attracting the attention of Beth or Moran. To the latter this scene might reveal everything.

He disarmed Maddern and secured his hands, and then said:

"Stranger, if you go on the quiet you'll find me the easiest man in the world to git along with; but ef you kick you'll pass out, an' I'll be to the trouble o' totin' yer carcass."

He then lifted his prisoner to his feet, and marched him off on the double-quick.

Billy Maddern said not a word. He now saw that there was more in this thing than he had calculated upon. However, he fell into the natural error of supposing that Si's precautions were all on the lady's account.

So they found their way to the cave, and Maddern was duly incarcerated along with his missing comrades.

Dimijohn had captured Old-man Crocker merely as a precautionary measure. He might turn out to be the partner for whom Six-foot Si had left the message. Dimijohn had therefore given it to him, but had afterward secured him, so that if he proved to be any one else, he would not have the chance to do any mischief.

What was Six-foot Si's astonishment when confronted with the bad man of Bloody Run!

It might be supposed that Crocker would rave like a madman at sight of him. This however was not the case. Though he had been as roughly handled as by Si himself—since Dimijohn had found it necessary to stun him to secure him—he had not indulged in one word of anger or an act of violence since he recovered consciousness, to find himself a prisoner.

He now looked from his cell at Six-foot Si without the manifestation of any emotion whatever.

"So this is what you've been up to?" asked Si. "I 'lowed somethin' o' the kind. You come nigh gittin' the move on me. Waal, thar's many a good man as 'ud git cleaned out at any game you could skeer up, ef it wasn't for luck now an' ag'in."

"I was tryin' to pay up the lick you give me t'other night," observed Crocker, coolly.

"I did, so," admitted Si, without reserve.

"Your man give me another jest like it."

"I owe him one fur that."

"The boys is huntin' me, I reckon?"

"Yes."

"You may tell 'em fur me, ef you like, to give it up."

"Thar ain't much show o' their nosin' you out hyar."

"I reckon not."

Then Old-man Crocker turned away, going back in his cell, out of sight in the darkness.

From Lal Burgess who was only too glad of a chance to talk to any human being who could understand and reply to him, Six-foot Si learned the particulars of Old-man Crocker's capture.

Si could only pat Dimijohn on the back, to express his indebtedness for this service, and indicate by signs his purpose of rewarding it more substantially. But the dwarf seemed to be amply repaid by the satisfaction he took in his feat.

Then Si returned to the open air, and to Bloody Run.

In the same situation that Old-man Crocker had occupied, Hank Budlong did not venture into the cave alone, to the rescue of his men, whom he now believed to be prisoners of Joe Moran and his new "backer." Nor did he intercept this unknown confederate of his foe, whom he might easily have "dropped." But he thought he knew a game worth two of that.

Leaving Six-foot Si to return to Bloody Run undisturbed, he took a route of his own, making his way directly to the remnant of his land, whom he had posted where he could find them when he was ready for their services.

Just before nightfall he returned with them, and instantly invested the mouth of the cavern.

One man he placed there on guard, with commands to shoot any one who presented himself at the opening, save only Hank Budlong himself.

"We don't want nobody slippin' by us, an' gittin' into Bloody Run, an' givin' them fellers the twig, before us," he said. "No matter who it looks like. Lay him out, unless ye hear my yawp beforehand."

Entering the cavern, he found no trace of Dimijohn, though he learned of him from the captives whom he rapidly released.

"Never mind him," he said. "He's give us the slip in some o' these hyar passages. But let him slide. He can't git out, an' he can't do us no hurt as long as he stays in."

Never was there greater rejoicing than among the men who were now released from the most terrible imprisonment imaginable. Jimmy Kenney mingled protests of his innocence with expressions of delight at reunion with his pards, but of course no one was disposed to censure

him for succumbing to a man who had proved equal to the bagging of the better part of the whole band.

When Budlong's attention was attracted to the one stranger among the prisoners—Old-man Crocker, he scanned him sharply, and demanded:

"An' who air you?"

"When you git to Bloody Run," replied Crocker, quietly, "the boys will tell you that most of 'em know me. My handle, ef that'll do ye any good, is Old-man Crocker."

"An' what air you doin' in hyar?"

"I happened to run up ag'in' Joe Moran, what calls himself Sam Sutter, up to the Run. I was layin' fur to git in on him, when I dropped to a blind-side pard o' his'n. I nosed out some underhand game what they was up to, an' trailed the pard to hyar. One o' your men thar'll tell ye how I got took in."

When he had listened to the account of the struggle between Old-man Crocker and the dwarf, Budlong still objected, looking with sullen suspicion at Crocker:

"That's all right on the face of it, but ye can't always go by indications. How do I know that this hyar ain't a put-up job? It would be mighty easy to have you in hyar fur jest sich a mishap as has happened. I hain't got no guarantee that you won't give us the slip the minute you get outside, an' warn your pards."

"My pards!" repeated Old-man Crocker, with an ugly laugh. "Boss, suppose you run yer finger along hyar under my hair?"

Budlong did as requested, and Crocker explained:

"That thar bump, Joe Moran himself put on my topknot. This hyar one, what the blood ain't been washed off of yit, yon shorty give me to remember him by, by knockin' my knowledge-box ag'in' the floor o' this hyar cave. Ef them love-tokens whar you was raised, I hain't got nothin' to say."

"Waal, them ain't calculated fur to make fast friends, an' that's a fact," admitted Budlong, apparently more favorably impressed. "Ef you'll stand in with us, I reckon you kin git squar' with Joe Moran fur them, an' with his pard too."

"Give me one crack at Moran!" said Old-man Crocker, with his ugliest scowl. "I don't owe his pard nothin'."

Thereupon Budlong hurried his men out of the cavern.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Dimijohn, and Budlong left the sentinel at the mouth of the cave, with instructions to guard it for an hour, when he was to go to a rendezvous of the band.

"I reckon ef we git an hour's start of him, we don't ask no more odds," said the outlaw chief. "Ef we don't git away with Joe Moran before he kin git word to him, we'd better let the job out."

He had supplied an ample number of horses for his men, and the absence of Slippery Pete, whom we know more familiarly as Migglesie, left one for Old-man Crocker.

Quietly Budlong put the stranger under the care of Billy Maddern, with instructions to shoot him at the slightest suspicious signs.

The prisoners were much weakened by their confinement, but all were able to keep the saddle and so they set out for Bloody Run, at as round a pace as the darkness would permit.

They had nearly reached their destination without mishap, when all of a sudden there was a cry and a confusion in the cavalcade, out of which one horse shot like an arrow.

"Shoot the spy!" shouted Hank Budlong, even before he knew what had happened.

He had been riding in the advance, with Old-man Crocker between him and Billy Maddern. An obstruction in the road had caused him to push on ahead. He had turned at the sound of a cry, to see Maddern falling from his saddle; and at the same instant his own horse received such a prod with a bowie that he bounded wildly to one side, almost precipitating himself and his rider over a cliff.

To escape this danger, Budlong leaped from his saddle, and was therefore unable to set out at once in pursuit of Old-man Crocker, who had shot up a way at that point diverging from the road they were following.

Reflecting that, after their long incarceration, the better part of his men were not in condition for the rough scramble the fugitive promised to lead them, Hank Budlong had scarcely ordered the pursuit when he countermanded it.

"We hain't no time fur no side chase. Make a dead break fur Bloody Run. Ef yon galoot gits thar first, we might as well hang up the fiddle an' the bow!"

Billy Maddern was rather groggy, but it was found that he could sit in the saddle after he had been lifted to it, and leaving him to make as good time as he could, Budlong and the others dashed forward at the top of their speed.

Old-man Crocker had taken a desperate risk for the chance of getting his revenge. His scheme was to reach Bloody Run in time to save Moran, when, having by this means established a claim upon his gratitude, he would go into partnership with him, and together they could see what could be made of the cryptogram.

He was not yet clear as to Six-foot Si's cause of enmity with Moran, though it was plain to him that Si was temporarily keeping Moran's other enemies at bay for his own ends. He meant to shoot Si on sight!

So these conflicting interests were closing in on all sides, and Beth Crawford had not yet accomplished her purpose.

Could Six-foot Si stave off interference any longer?

When—how—would the hour come?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CRISIS!

As Six-foot Si approached Bloody Run, he was more and more overcome by what is commonly called a presentiment of evil.

His foreboding were really due to his realizing more clearly the precariousness of the situation, now that he had been trailed to the cave.

At a prearranged rendezvous, he met our old friend Bummer Boggs, who had kept rather "shady" since his bout with Old-man Crocker.

With unquestionable pluck, he had crept into the camp at night, to pursue his office of haunting specter, and had contributed not a little to giving Joe Moran a foretaste of what is supposed to await such men as he.

But recently Six-foot Si had enlisted him in a more commonplace, earthly business, during the intervals of his ghostly employment.

Together they went to a secluded spot, where Boggs, with a proud wave of the hand, directed attention to three horses, at sight of which Si's eyes kindled at once.

"Waal," he cried, with a glow of satisfaction, "you've done well, ef thar's anything in looks. Them is beauties, an' no mistake. We'll have use fur 'em, an' fur every muscle in their harnsome bodies, before many days passes over our heads, I'm thinkin'. From this on, you must have 'em ready fur to straddle an' away at any minute."

And arranging that they be brought to a gulch easily accessible from Beth Crawford's shanty at night, though kept in a safer place during the day, he returned to the camp, and to his anxious observation of Beth's scheme of revenge.

Of late everything indicated that the girl was striving to bring matters to a crisis. The fact was, that she began to realize that she could not much longer endure the strain of this terrible struggle, and that, if she delayed, in order to protract Moran's sufferings before the final blow, a sudden collapse of her strength might rob her of the results of all she had gone through.

So now Si found that, even at this unusual hour, Moran was with her in her shanty, more than usual under the influence of liquor.

Six-foot Si was a man of sterling integrity—one who intended to treat everybody "on the square," but he had not that refined sense of propriety which would make him hesitate to spy upon this scene. The end being, not self-seeking, but Beth Crawford's good, he was not over-delicate about the means.

So it must be admitted that he took advantage of a slight disarrangement of the muslin curtain to peep into the shanty, and see what was going on.

He saw that Beth was plying her guest with liquor, which emboldened him to press his affection upon her, which she repulsed with thinly-disguised loathing.

They were canvassing the old theme of their future, Beth now despairing, now contemptuously incredulous of Joe's pretended prospects.

Step by step she was goading him into a maintenance of his claim by a betrayal of the cryptogram.

Six-foot Si could not endure this scene, though he saw that Beth kept his rival at so respectful a distance that he was not permitted so much as to touch her hand by way of a caress.

Again and again he rushed away from the shanty, yet was ever drawn back by an irresistible fascination.

In one of these excursions a figure—well calculated to excite alarm by its hideousness—rushed up to him, with wild gesticulations and the utterance of uncouth, inarticulate sounds.

It was lucky that he recognized this figure before it seized hold of him, or he might have defended himself against it with his ever-ready weapons.

As it was, he in turn clutched the figure, with as great excitement as it manifested, ejaculating:

"Good heavens, it's Dimijohn! What's the row, pard? What air you doin' hyar? Oh, fur a tongue to tell me! But ye can't spit 'er out! What's to do?"

It was indeed the dwarf. While out of the cave for an airing—for he found it a no more congenial place of abode than did his prisoners—he discovered the approach of Hank Budlong and his party.

Resistance was of course hopeless. He could do nothing but run and warn his employer, trusting to the delay at the cave to give him start sufficient so that he could cover the distance before he was overtaken by the horses of the other party.

Now that he was here, it did not need words to show that the worst possible had happened.

He threw his arms about like flails, opened his mouth and gnashed his teeth in a most horrible grimace, distorting his whole shapeless body in his efforts to convey some intelligence.

"It's all up!" cried Six-foot Si. "It don't matter how, but they're all out, an' a-comin'!"

He rushed off to Beth Crawford's shanty, with only the blind impulse to get her away.

As he reached the shanty Six-foot Si came to a dead stand-still. It looked as if he must stand with folded hands, and let events take their course.

What was being done in there? He looked again.

Eh! what did he see? Moran had borrowed Beth's scissors, and was ripping a place in the lining of his coat, while she looked on with a frown of impatience, as if she did not see the utility of this wanton making of work to repair it again.

Moran drew forth several scraps of paper—brown paper, such as is used to wrap hardware in, like that on which had been written the warning to beware of Bob Cady!

Six-foot Si could see rude tracings upon them, evidently with a blunt lead pencil.

Moran arranged them like the pieces of a puzzle on the table.

Then Beth bent over them with awakened interest, or, rather, she now let her interest be seen; for from the first appearance of those precious scraps, she had the fiercest struggle of her life to repress the headlong impulse to snatch them from the fumbling hands of the inebriate.

She assured herself that all was there—the map, the describing cryptogram, and its key—and then came such a transformation as if an angel were suddenly turned into a devil.

In the supposed security of her shanty, Joe Moran had eased himself of the weight of his weapons, laying his belt on the table before him.

Beth now seized one of the revolvers, and brushed the belt, with its other pistol and bowie off the table out of the reach of her intended victim.

Then, while he sat with mouth agape, staring at her in bewilderment, she leveled his own weapon upon him, and let him see her face, now expressive of all the unutterable hate and detestation she felt for him.

In words that were like flames of living fire she told him who she was. That was all, but it was enough. It sent the icy chill of despair to his heart. Appeal was useless, and he knew the deadly accuracy of aim she had acquired under his instruction.

She gave him time for a prayer to Heaven, perhaps more merciful than she, but warned him that he must be brief.

He sat staring blankly, his mouth wide open, his eyes protruding, unmanned, waiting to die the death of the coward at last.

But this was the moment for which Six-foot Si had waited and planned. Forgetful of everything but the necessity of averting this deed which could never be undone, he burst into the shanty, shouting:

"For God's sake, don't shoot!"

The woman turned and looked at him. The blankness of expression—one of feeble, anxious questioning—showed that the collapse had come, and her mind had at last yielded to the unnatural strain. The significance of her surroundings had slipped from her grasp, and the moment her eyes left him she had forgotten her victim. She knew Si as she had known him at Mulligan's Bend, as a friend to whom she might turn to explain the bewildering burden that oppressed her mind.

With a great heart-cry, Six-foot Si could scarcely restrain the impulse to take her to his breast—that breast which, would she but accept it, would be her securest refuge while life lasted.

Then the icy chill of fear that had locked Joe Moran's faculties melted. He saw his chance in the preoccupation of these two, and with a yell of murderous hate, he bounded from his seat and wrenched the weapon from the girl's unresisting hand.

A breath, and she would have been reunited with the dead lover she had sought so madly to avenge. But Six-foot Si's vigilance could not sleep when she was menaced, and with one lightning blow, he stretched Joe Moran senseless on the floor at her feet.

Without a pause in his movements, he bound him securely with a rope which he had carried about his waist for that purpose.

Then, quickly gathering up the fragments of the precious cryptogram and placing them in his pocket, he led Beth unresisting from the shanty, and hurried her to where Bummer Boggs waited with the horses.

He returned for Joe Moran, intending to take him to Mulligan's Bend, and there exact from him a penalty for the atrocious crime, as nearly lawful as Judge Lynch could make it.

But a party of horsemen dashed up to the shanty before him, and there were already signs of awakening excitement in the heart of the

camp—some one wildly summoning the boys to the rescue.

Old-man Crocker had taken a cut-off which, had his horse held out, would have given him a considerable start of the outlaws; but the animal falling, he had been forced to abandon him, and continue on foot, so that he entered the camp with Hank Budlong and his men at his very heels.

As he passed Beth Crawford's shanty, he saw Joe Moran lying bound on the floor, and yelled to warn him of his danger. He dared not stop to aid him. The enemy were too close. Both would be captured if he sought to carry him bodily away. And then, was he worth it? Could he be lying there with the cryptogram on his person, or the secret of its hiding yet in his possession alone?

With these speculations, Old-man Crocker kept on to the center of the camp, to rouse the boys to repel this invasion, and rescue Joe Moran, or his body at least, from the revengeful victims of his treachery.

But he was not in time to save the traitor. Hank Budlong had learned that the most likely place to find him was at Miss Falmouth's shanty, and after the escape of Old-man Crocker destroyed all hope of a secret entrance into the camp, he had staked all on this one chance.

He found him bound, but just recovering consciousness.

There was no time for delay. The camp would be aroused in a minute. Budlong made a demand for the cryptogram, but Moran set his jaws with a defiance which showed that nothing was to be got out of him.

He had nothing to hope but death, and he would do nothing to advantage the men he had tricked.

But the fact that he was bound told Budlong that another had been before him, and had probably left nothing of value, and this was confirmed by the ripped place in Moran's coat.

"Boys," cried their leader, "the cryptogram is gone up. Six-foot Si has got in his work hyar, an' we won't find it this side o' Mulligan's Bend. All we've got to do is to finish up this chap. We don't want no more bouts with him, anyway. Up a tree he goes!"

And almost in a twinkling they had him dangling before the door.

"But hyar comes the Bloody Runites!" cried Budlong. "Fill him full o' lead, fellers, an' let it go at that."

A volley of pistol-shots showed that they executed this ruthless order almost literally, and then they dashed away, as Old-man Crocker and his friends came up.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WILDEST RIDE ON RECORD.

OLD-MAN CROCKER restrained his friends from pursuing the outlaws, having a scheme of greater promise in view.

With his own hand he cut down the swaying body, and eased it to the ground.

Bleeding from a score of wounds, Moran had yet vitality enough to open his eyes and stare around with a wildness that would have frozen the blood of men less used to such scenes.

"Six-foot Si!" shouted Old-man Crocker in his ear. "Whar is he? Has he got the girl?"

"Mulligan's Be—"

But the word died upon the lips edged with bloody foam, and, his eyes turning upward, Joe Moran's head fell back over the arm that sustained it.

"He's gone up, boys," said Old-man Crocker, with no apparent concern, "but the chap as has ouched us all, an' beat Joe Moran out of his girl in the bargain, is somewhar on the road to Mulligan's Bend. It's the Teaser, the which one o' Budlong's crowd spotted him as Six-foot Si o' Mulligan's Bend. Not to mention as we're sworn to stand by Joe Moran, I ask you—is any two-legged rooster goin' fur to git away with Bloody Run like this hyar galoot has?"

A universal yell of dissent was his answer, and a moment later, under his direction, the crowd was rushing after horses, to take up the pursuit of Six-foot Si and his precious charge.

Old-man Crocker said nothing about the cryptogram. The pride of his townsmen would make them ready to play cat's-paw to his private interest.

Dandy Dave was not the least zealous. Though he saw through Old-man Crocker, it would not do to leave him to head this popular demonstration.

Meanwhile Six-foot Si had returned to the gulch where his horses waited, to find Beth Crawford in a lethargic stupor. She was not unconscious, as in a swoon, yet she did not heed when he spoke to her, and could not be made to move of her own volition.

What was to be done? Was all lost? Not while Six-foot Si lived!

"Bear a hand hyar, pard!" he cried, leaping into one of the saddles. "Give her to me!"

Bummer Boggs lifted the unresisting girl, and placed her in Si's arms.

"Now give me the lead-lines o' them hosses. I shall need 'em all before I git to Mulligan's Bend. That's it. Now, you shift fur yerself! Git!"

And, leading the two spare horses, one of

which he had provided for the transportation of Joe Moran, he dashed away at full speed.

But, how little start he actually had of the men of Bloody Run, who were pursuing him like bloodhounds!

Where the road bent like a horseshoe, his pursuers were following one side of the curve, as he sped along on the opposite side. They yelled at him across the gulf that intervened. Not wasting breath upon them, he urged forward his flying horse, while Beth sagged in his arms, unconscious of what was going on about her.

On! on! mile after mile, until the panting of his over-burdened horse showed him that the animal must have relief.

Then, with but a momentary pause, he changed to the back of another, and away again!

Now he sped through a mining-camp, where the wild clatter of his flying hoofs brought everybody from their beds.

They were in time to see him vanishing, and to wonder at the cavalcade that swept by in full chase, loading the air with execrations.

Alternating his remaining horses with the greatest care, Si could barely hold his own against them. The pause of a moment to change from saddle to saddle was just so much golden time lost.

The double burden overtaxed the animals, as superior as was their quality.

Then came the terrible moment when the lagging of the led horse showed that he was worn out, and would be of no further service. All must now depend upon the metal of the last and best of the three. How nobly he stood to his work, when his sides heaved, his nostrils quivered, his eyes dilated with exhaustion, while the foam from his pendulous lips dappled his breast, and the sweat was rubbed to lather wherever a strap chafed his reeking hide.

How many weary miles yet lay before? Would the night never lift?

Yes! there was a gray light in the east. It brightened, it broadened, it mounted higher and higher, until the heavens were of a shell tint, and objects began to emerge from the gloom.

The clear note of a bird cleft the air like a cimeter of song, to be hushed with affright by the din of clanging hoof-beats, the yells and execration of a furious mob.

Nearer and nearer they drew! See how they had strung out in a long, straggling line.

Old-man Crocker was in advance. His face was ghastly pale. His eyes blazed with the baleful glare of unrelenting hate. He held a revolver ready.

Three hundred yards behind him came Dandy Dave, furious at being thus outdone. It was no consolation, but rather an aggravation, that an equal distance separated him from his fellows in the rear. They were just near enough to witness his humiliation.

And now the haven of security, Mulligan's Bend, was almost in sight. A mile—Ah, that last mile! Would the jaded horse, swaying from side to side as he staggered on, panting as if his heart would burst, hold out?

And the man?

All through that night-long agony he had borne his precious burden, until even his muscles of steel seemed as if they would give way at every jolt. Beth sagged in his arms like a limp corpse. Was she dead? He did not know.

His haggard face was drawn with a pain inexpressible. His eyes were set straight before him. His teeth were clinched. Every energy was summoned to the one office of endurance yet a little longer. A few minutes more of strength—then let him lie down and die, if need be.

But the way is treacherous. The horse sways, staggers, stumbles! Is he gone? A fall were fatal!

No! Rallying his waning strength, he recovers his footing. But it is only for a faltering step or two, when, with a moan of pain, his great heart fails him, and he sinks slowly to the earth.

His rider has strength enough to disentangle his feet from the stirrups. But he too, clinging to his burden with the desperate persistence of a merging of all the faculties into one purpose, reels but a step or two, when he drops upon his knees, and sags over sideways, and so sinks to the ground, lying like one dead.

Such a yell as springs up, and traverses the length of that straggling line! It was not started by Old-man Crocker. His iron-locked lips have not relaxed. Only a deadlier glow in his eyes tells of his exultation. Nor did Dandy Dave find cause for triumph in the spectacle of his rival triumphing before his eyes. Some one further down, not high enough for jealousy, started it.

But what matter? Its effect was the same. It thrilled through Six-foot Si's sinking faculties like an electric shock.

He roused, started up on his elbow, stared at the approaching foe!

Then out came his revolver. A flash! Old-man Crocker's horse bounded into the air with a shrill scream, the rider threw his feet out of the stirrups, and both went to the ground with a crash!

But now Six-foot Si has gathered his unconscious burden in his arms again, and is staggering to his feet. See!—he runs, with some-

thing of the wild excitement of a maniac, down the mountain road.

But he has a pursuer on foot. Old-man Crocker has risen from the dust, and is following with the dogged persistency of malignant hatred.

Behind comes the rout—and Mulligan's Bend in sight!

Old-man Crocker has drawn his revolver at last. The clang of Dandy Dave's horse's hoofs decides him. He lifts it, and fires. Again, and Six-foot Si winces as if stung!

At this moment Dandy Dave bounds by. As he does so, he turns so that Old-man Crocker can see the expression of his face. That is enough. The malicious triumph, the unuttered chuckle, is maddening.

Old-man Crocker turns the muzzle of his revolver so that it almost touches the side of the horse, and fires.

Dandy Dave goes down, but he rises again in Old-man Crocker's path, as the latter is almost in the act of leaping over him.

Then these two, animated by the same jealousy, determined to rule or ruin, clinch, and writhe for the mastery.

As their followers come up, they stop, at a loss whether to interfere in this struggle, or to let it proceed to a conclusion.

But with savage oaths both of the contestants order them to follow up the chase, leaving them to settle their own quarrel.

Bewildered, they set out to carry this into effect.

But what is this? Their yells, the foolish uproar of their premature triumph, have roused the camp; and here come men, half-dressed, but with the only essential thing—their weapons—in readiness for any need.

What a shout they set up, how they bound forward, when they see the chase! Not yet knowing the man who is seeking safety among them, for they do not penetrate his disguise, they espouse his cause without question. Is not that a woman in his arms? A woman is never on the wrong side!

The pursuers pull up, turn, and ride back to their contending leaders.

The fugitive sways, falters, and, the terrible necessity now over, collapses, and sinks unconscious into the outstretched arms of his friends.

They recognize Six-foot Si. They recognize Beth Crawford. It is needless to tell them what has happened.

"Hurrah! Joe Moran is dead!" goes up the shout.

Then, with a sudden universal impulse, they charge his backers.

There is no time for delay or parleying. The jaded men of Bloody Run have no relish for meeting the men of Mulligan's Bend in the first glow of the battle fever. A truce to all private differences. Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker are parted, and all scamper away.

The wildest ride on record is run, and the hero has won it!

Wan as a broken lily, for she is convalescent after a brain fever that has taken her to the gateway, having passed which no one ever returns. Beth Crawford sits in an easy-chair which would make an ordinary joiner stare—the product of Six-foot Si's mechanical genius.

On one side stands Colonel Dangerfield—"Iron Despard"—holding her hand, while his beautiful wife, with her eyes swimming in tears of sympathetic happiness, clings to him, with her arm about his waist and her head hugging against his shoulder. She is thinking of their hour of happiness, when the clouds of a terrible estrangement had broken away, and comparing it with this.

Six-foot Si stands on the other side, looking—well, bashful!

Beth, looking into Colonel Dangerfield's face, with an expression of grateful acknowledgment, is speaking.

"You were right, dear friend!" she says. "It was a mistake—a fatal mistake! How blind I must have been, that I could not see it then. Up to the very crisis I could see nothing but blood! I had not a particle of remorse or pity. But at the last moment, when all that I had meditated was to be consummated, it burst upon me in all its enormity, and paralyzed me! The horror of that moment is indescribable!"

And Beth shudders.

"You would never have done it!" bursts in Mrs. Dangerfield.

"I don't know," answers Beth. "The impetus of my long-meditated resolve might have carried me through to the end. If I had refrained, it certainly would not have been a voluntary act."

"No, no!" she adds, with a sudden burst of feeling, extending her other hand to Six-foot Si. "I owe everything to this best of friends!"

And he, with a courtesy like that of a knight of old, bends over her hand, and touches it respectfully with his lips.

Mrs. Dangerfield looks across at him, and there is a wonderful happy brilliancy in her eyes. Is it that, with a woman's intuition, she sees the portent of some bright possibility of the future?

THE END.

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